

**Empire**  
**Book Two \* Heir To The Throne**  
**by**  
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Chapter One

Apprentice

His Imperial Highness sat to the right of His Imperial Majesty as the debate droned on. Daniel's installation as a Prince of The Empire had been four months ago, much had occurred since then. The Snakes were suing for peace, they had sent an actual envoy to the edge of Imperial space. The hideous thing even spoke understandable English. Humanity's Emperor had convened a council of the Imperial Knights to assist him in weighing the merits of opening peace talks. Various 'experts' both military and civilian were offering opinions. At the moment the Archbishop of the Reformed Church was pleading at some length for the side of showing mercy to mankind's mortal enemy.

"We must show the compassion and mercy that Jesus taught us, that all religions teach us."

Daniel had sat patiently through the long day's debate, he had remained mute and observant as his youth required in the presence of his elders, no matter his title. Anger finally boiled up in the boy, talk of mercy for his hated enemy caused him to stand. Even the long-winded Archbishop took notice of this and ceased his blathering.

"I cannot sit here and hold my tongue any longer sir," Daniel began, "I have had some experience with those 'things' to whom you would so kindly extend your hand! If the Snakes are suing for peace it is only trickery to buy time or to get their claws on our shield technology! They regard us as animals and have no

thoughts of the idea of mercy! If the military situation were reversed would you, kind sir, stand there and tell us how merciful those monsters might be to us?"

More than a few in the council hall voiced their agreement with the new Prince's outburst, especially those who had faced the Snakes in battle.

The Archbishop reddened at his sharp rebuke, after the hall had quieted he managed a reply.

"Your Highness, we all know so very well of the harsh treatment you suffered while a prisoner of war, but war is a..."

Daniel interrupted, "Harsh treatment? Sir, you have no concept of 'harsh treatment' you have no idea about it at all! I have listened to the screams of good men being dissected alive!"

"If I may continue, Your Highness." The Archbishop seemed taken aback at the boy's angry words and manner.

"Yes sir, you may of course continue, but I am blessed that I do not have to sit here and listen to you!"

With that Daniel bowed curtly toward the Emperor and walked out of the ornate council hall, a majority of those assembled stood and applauded the boy. The Emperor failed to suppress his smile at the young Prince's actions. May God help the Snakes if Daniel were running the show!

Daniel's escort scurried to fall in beside him as he walked stony faced from the hall.

"Sire, where...?" Captain Walker was unprepared for such a sudden departure.

"Please take me to the Hawkings Institute, I'd like to visit with Ian for a while."

"Yes Sire." The naval officer had never been treated rudely by the Prince and now was no exception, still it seemed best to remain quiet while the boy was so angry.

The New Empire's heir to the throne sat alone staring out at the overcast and wet landscape during the short flight to his friend's new place of duty. Daniel was learning some of what it meant to hold great power, he smiled less these days and longed to return to naval duty. Quick visits to Ian often restored a sense of reality and stability.

Ian was now in his true element, the prestigious naval physics institute was his every dream come true. The Hawkings Institute prided itself on having added Ensign Murphy to its list of honored researchers, the Murphy Shield had opened whole new venues of applied physics. When Daniel quietly entered Ian's small private research lab his best and truest of friends, his brother, was down upon all fours looking for a dropped widget of some sort. Daniel smiled and sat silently on a stool, Ian was muttering to himself and not making a lot of sense.

"Lose some marbles?" Daniel finally asked.

"Huh?" Ian bumped his head on a table as he stood up, a smile lit up his face when he spotted Daniel.

"Most nobleness and highness, may I grovel at your feet?" Ian bowed till he lost his balance, the Prince would never be more than just 'Daniel' to him.

"You may. What are you screwing up today?"

"Everything. The planetary shield design should work, so far it isn't stable enough. I think the natural planetary magnetic fluctuations are the problem. We're pretty close to getting it right."

"Sorry I asked." Daniel knew when to cut off Ian's technical explanations.

"What brings Your Hugeness here today," Ian asked, "did His Majesty order your head on a pike or something?"

"I got fed up with the Archbishop's 'have mercy on the Snakes routine', I walked out of the council after I gave him my opinion about his nitwit ideas."

Even Ian had to blink and think some about what Daniel had done.

"When is His Majesty going to let you get back to flying a Falcon, I think maybe all of this Imperial Court routine is making you crazy?"

Daniel only nodded in agreement, maybe he was getting a bit frayed around the edges. No maybe about it.

"He told me that I would be dividing my time between the navy and my royal duties, maybe I should remind him about that?"

"Gently and tactfully." Ian chided.

"Yes, but he saddled me with this job and I think I need to look him in the eye and be a bit more...demanding, I guess."

Ian nodded in agreement and switched subjects.

"Father's bought four new tractors and two more reapers and he's hired on six farmhands. He's building quarters for the new people and another bigger barn."

"Great! I've been getting some messages from Ellen," Daniel reddened a bit, "she's finally caught up with all of her missed school work."

"So what have you been saying to her?" Ian grinned at Daniel's discomfort.

"Well... None of your business, peasant!"

"Spare me Sire, I meant no disrespect!" Ian broke out into a serious laughing fit, so did Daniel. It felt good to be laughing again.

Prince Daniel had a quiet dinner alone with the Emperor that evening, His Majesty was the first to broach the subject of the Archbishop.

"You rather handed the Archbishop his head this afternoon, any comments?"

"I lost my temper Sire, perhaps I should apologize to him and to you."

"No. What you said needed saying by someone. The Archbishop is a good man but a bit light on common sense. He's also an insufferable windbag."

Daniel smiled at this description of the cleric, so did the Emperor.

"Will there be peace talks, Sire?"

"I think not yet, the Snakes are playing for time just as you said. Our forces are pushing them back even beyond their own boundaries."

"Ian's still having problems with the planetary shield but I think he will have it operational pretty soon," Daniel explained. "If the Snakes get really desperate they may resort to atomic attacks on our population centers, even here on Earth."

"Very true," agreed the Emperor, "all the more reason to keep to our present course until Ian's working shield is protecting every planet in the Empire."

"Sire, you once said that I would be dividing my time between my royal duties and the navy. I think it's time I did some dividing. May I return to the fleet?"

"Yes." The Emperor's simple answer caught Daniel off guard for a moment.

"Thank you, Sire."

"It will be much more difficult for you in the fleet, much more so than even when you were knighted. People will truly fear you, they'll keep their distance. You'll need to work to gain their trust, to assure them that you will not abuse your title."

"I understand that Sire, I intend to just be the best ensign that I know how to be, never mind the black uniform and title."

"Good, but you must also always keep in mind just what you are now. Try to strike a balance between whom you are and what you are."

"Yes Sire."

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HMS Pegasus was ten hours from its morning departure time. The light attack carrier had its full complement of Falcons already delivered on board, all direct from acceptance trials. One pilot had yet to report in but there was still time. Pegasus was as new a vessel as it is possible to be, it's crew mostly green recruits and pilots right out of the newly established flight schools. This was Pegasus' shake down

cruise, training, testing, putting things in proper order. The pilot apprentice program had been unable to keep up with the demand for new pilots, land based flight schools had been created to fill the void. Most of the new pilots were only senior midshipmen and newly commissioned ensigns. Save for one.

Daniel waited until well after midnight before quietly leaving his escort and reporting on board, he knew from experience the sort of disruption he could cause if his arrival was known in advance. Daniel's uniform was the same as all other naval ensigns save for the fact that instead of being a dark blue it was jet black. Instead of the silver filigree of an Imperial Knight on his right shoulder there was now gold filigree on both shoulders. Following the royal tradition he wore none of his medals, he did wear his rank insignia and the pilot wings of the Fleet Ace.

True to form it was another dark and stormy night, Daniel's foul weather cloak hid his identity from the sleepy and bored rating who saluted and directed him to sign the ship's personnel log.

"May I trouble you for a copy of your orders, midshipman?" Asked the rating.

A reasonable mistake, Daniel was still only a rather undersized twelve year old, he looked every bit the junior midshipman. Daniel produced the needed document and handed it to the inexperienced rating. It took some time for the rating to comprehend what the HHH in front of Daniel's name and rank meant. The poor rating couldn't seem to decide between saluting, bowing or dropping dead. Daniel grinned and came to his rescue.

"Perhaps you could ask the watch officer if he might see me? Stay calm, I never have people executed before breakfast."

Daniel's gentle words and his handshake brought the rating back into working order, an intercom call was made to the watch officer. While this was occurring Daniel took off his wet beret and cloak, there was now no doubting about just who he was or what he was. The rating was having some trouble getting the senior lieutenant on duty to believe him.

"Sir, please believe me, it's him... His Highness, the Prince!"

"Wadsworth, I know this is some sort of stunt! Who put you up to this?" Lieutenant Zamora knew that some of his fellow officers were addicted to practical jokes.

"Sir..." the rating was cut off short.

"Knock it off or you'll go before the Captain!" Zamora ended the conversation.

"I'll just go to the bridge and report in there, don't worry." Daniel felt truly sorry for poor Wadsworth, the young rating was doing his very best. The terrified rating was left to watch over Daniel's sea chest and pressure suit container, the locator boards showed Daniel the route to the bridge.

Most of the crew was asleep at this hour catching what rest they could before the hectic activity of departure. Daniel only encountered one tired and harried looking junior midshipman on his way to the ship's bridge, the poor middle got confused between bowing and saluting and tried to do both at once. There was only a skeleton watch on the bridge, an ensign, three ratings and Lieutenant Zamora.

"On deck!" One of the ratings had finally noticed that the heir to the Imperial Throne was standing quietly at the entrance to the bridge area. Lieutenant Zamora nearly suffered heart failure as he turned and then snapped to rigid attention.

"Please stand easy," Daniel said quietly as he approached Zamora with his orders and records packet in hand.

"Your Highness... I thought, I mean..." Zamora stammered.

"Not to worry, sir. Seaman Wadsworth may need some sort of nerve tonic though, he really tried his best." Daniel smiled and extended his hand to the shaken officer.

"I truly apologize, Your Highness. This is terrible!"

"No sir, I should apologize for popping in unannounced, I didn't want there to be a big fuss made so close to departure. I have my orders and records here, I've been assigned to Pegasus for flight duty, and please, no ceremony."

"Thank you..Sire. I'll send for the Captain at once, he's getting a few hours of sleep at the moment."

"If you please sir, let him rest. We can meet in the morning, I could use a bit of sleep myself. If you could point me toward ensign country I'll get my quarters squared away and turn in."

"Of course sire, Ensign Spencer here can assist you, duty requires me to remain here on the bridge."

"Thank you sir," Daniel concluded, "and please be at ease, I'm just here for normal duty, not to conduct an inquisition."

Daniel handed over his records and orders and once more shook the officer's hand. He then left the bridge with Ensign Spencer, morning would come all too soon.

John Howard, Pegasus' captain, was in the habit of checking with the bridge when he first awoke, before he even left his bunk. Lieutenant Zamora was still on duty when he answered his captain's call.

"Anything to report, lieutenant?"

"There is indeed sir. The last flight officer reported aboard at around 0100 sir." Zamora wasn't quite sure how to go about this.

"I suppose it's another middle just out of flight school?"

"Sir, brace yourself. The Fleet Ace, His Imperial Highness Ensign Daniel Grayson is the new pilot sir."

"It's too early for silliness lieutenant and I don't appreciate it!" Captain Howard wasn't known for his sense of humor.

"Sir, I have never been more serious," Zamora replied, "I shook his hand myself. It is indeed Prince Daniel."

"Good God." Howard almost whispered his reply.

"He asked me not to disturb your rest sir or I would have awakened you, he said he needed some sleep also. In truth sir, His Highness seemed like a very sensible and likeable young gentleman, not at all taken with his title."

"Where is he now?" Howard's mind was racing at full speed.

"Probably still asleep sir, Ensign Spencer helped him in finding a cabin and getting squared away."

"You put him in an ensign's cabin?"

"It was his request sir, he really seemed to only want an ensign's normal treatment and duties sir."

"I see. I shall want to meet with him as soon as he is up and about, have someone stationed outside his cabin to let me know when he is awake."

"Yes sir, I've already seen to that." Zamora had a rating doing just that.

"Are there any changes in our departure schedule?" Howard hoped for no more rude surprises this morning.

"No sir, everything is still on track, three hours and eight minutes until upship."

Daniel's timepiece began its incessant din all too soon, it seemed as if he had just put his head on the pillow.

"Shit!" This was often (always) Daniel's first word of the new day.

A shower in the cabin's tiny head brought him back to life, nothing to shave speeded things along. As Daniel was finishing dressing, he poked his head out of the door to check out what level of activity there was. A startled rating snapped to attention as the door opened.

"Good morning," Daniel offered.

"Good.. Good morning Your Highness! I was to report to the bridge when your were awake, Your Highness."

"Oh. Well then I suppose you should. Tell them I'll be there presently, perhaps I can speak with the Captain for a few minutes."

Daniel closed the door and finished dressing, he wished for the simpler days when the officers yelled at him and ratings tried to ignore him.

Daniel's carried a sealed envelope on his walk to the bridge, the trip was somewhat of an ordeal. If he had been the Grim Reaper complete with scythe the crew's reactions could not have been more extreme.

By the time he reached the bridge the entire vessel was abuzz with the news of their newest ensign.

"On Deck!"

The vessel's captain and senior officers snapped to attention as Daniel approached, they all looked extremely nervous.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Please stand at ease, please dispense with ceremony." Daniel moved forward with his hand extended to Captain Howard.

"A very great honor, Your Highness...Sire." Howard's command of royal protocol was a bit sketchy.

"The honor is mine, sir. I apologize for the stir my coming aboard has caused, I know how busy you all are trying to prepare for departure and everything."

"We are that, Sire. Still I feel badly that nothing was prepared for you," Howard replied.

"You had no notice, that was my doing. With respect sir, could you spare a few moments with me alone, then I'll stop interrupting everything?"

"Of course, Sire. Perhaps in my day cabin?"

"That would be fine sir, thank you."

Daniel shook hands with the other officers as they introduced themselves, then he accompanied the Captain the short distance to his day cabin.

Daniel's manner of speech had changed somewhat over the last months at court, he tended to be more formal and polite. He had to do a lot of growing up and changing in the last few months.

"I have taken the liberty of drawing up a special written order for your benefit sir," Daniel began as he handed the wax sealed envelope to the Captain. Howard accepted the envelope, wondering just what it may contain. Daniel remembered his manners, "Excuse me sir, please sit and be comfortable."

"Thank you, Sire. Please do the same." Howard indicated the chair next to his desk and waited for the boy to sit before he did.

Daniel continued, "The order I gave you basically allows everyone on board Pegasus to dispense with all of the ceremony and protocol my title normally requires. It would be very awkward and disruptive for everyone to be jumping to attention all of the time. There will be times ashore where protocol may have to be observed, I will try to minimize those times. I have earned the rank of ensign, I would be most grateful if you sir, and the rest of the crew could just treat me as an ensign. I'm pretty good with a Falcon, flying is what I want most to be doing."

A great load seemed to have lifted off of Captain Howard's shoulders after Daniel's short and rehearsed speech, things wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Thank you for that, Sire. Or should I now say Ensign?"

"Ensign sir, if you please." Daniel's smile put the man even more at ease.

"Very well then, I shall post a general order for the ship to that effect."

"Thank you sir. Now I should get out of your hair for the time being and let you attend to more important matters." Daniel hoped he was saying and doing the proper things.

"I never leave port on an empty stomach, will you join me in a fast breakfast, Ensign?"

"Thank you again sir, that does sound nice."

When Pegasus departed Daniel was back in his small cabin finishing his unpacking and getting things in inspection order. He had left his door open but so far no one had worked up the nerve to introduce themselves. Perhaps things would loosen up when his special order had been circulated. Great power is accompanied with great loneliness at times, a thick wall must be penetrated to make friends. Eventually there was a timid knock on the open door, a very small and skittish appearing midshipman stood just outside the cabin.

"Hi," Daniel said with a smile.

"Good morning Your Highness. Commander White's compliments Your Highness, and could you please follow me to flight operations?" Midshipman Peters seemed close to actually trembling.

"Sure thing, just let me grab my pressure suit. I suppose I should bring it along?"

Peters didn't seem to know and just stood pale and frozen, Daniel felt like yelling 'boo' at him but suppressed the urge.

Along the way Daniel attempted some conversation with Peters.

"Where are from, Mister Peters?"

"Scandinavia, Your Highness."

"You can drop the 'Your Highness' if you like, there's supposed to be an order in the works to let everyone treat me as just an ensign. Call me 'Sir' or 'Ensign!'."

"Yes Your...Sir." Peters wasn't loosening up much, Daniel just sighed and remained quite until they arrived at flight operations. There was of course a reception committee.

Lieutenant Commander Ky had received and posted the special order from his ship's captain. He was still quite uneasy as he stood waiting with his staff for his newest pilot to report for duty. Daniel came to attention and saluted after putting his pressure suit case on the deck.

"Ensign Grayson reporting for duty, sir."

Ky returned the salute with parade ground form.

"Welcome aboard Pegasus, Ensign. We are all quite honored to have you as one of ours." Ky prayed he wasn't being too familiar despite the special order from the captain.

"Thank very much sir. I brought my pressure suit along, I wasn't sure if I would be assigned a slot yet."

Daniel's simple and to the point reply thawed things quite a bit.

"We do have the one slot left, Ensign. Number forty-eight is unassigned, is that all right with you?"

"Sir, if things are all right with you then they are all right with me. I know this black jump suit is well, sort of intimidating. If it were up to me I would be wearing a regular blue jump suit, but it's not up to me.

Please just talk to me and treat me as any other flight ensign, no one's head will ever be put on a pike, no one's career will go sour if I need yelling at. I'm a good pilot if I can brag a bit, I can follow orders."

Daniel only wanted to be accepted as a pilot, not as the heir to all of the power in the Empire.

"Then we have an understanding, Ensign Grayson. You'll still have to be patient with everyone, I think you must understand that this is a big adjustment for us all to make." Ky was starting to like this Prince of The Empire.

"Yes sir, I know that. What should I be doing?"

"Stow your suit and helmet then go along to slot fifty, get acquainted with your crew chief and his men, check out the Falcon, it's brand new like all the others. There's a general briefing for all four flights at thirteen hundred hours in the pilot's assembly room, be there."

"Yes sir." Daniel braced to attention and headed off to do as he had been ordered. Ky and his staff let out a small (big) sigh of relief, they could work with this royal person.

While finding locker number forty-eight and then putting away his suit and helmet, Daniel had one of those heart-stopping moments of horror that come at the most unexpected times. Senior Midshipman Starling was just coming out of the shower area, a towel wrapped around his middle.

"Oh God, not again!" Daniel whispered to himself. Starling also took note of his nemesis, he already knew that Daniel was aboard and again cursed his incredible bad luck.

Daniel considered just turning around and leaving the locker room, he instead decided that biting the bullet was the best course of action.

"Mister Starling, we meet again. How do we keep doing this?"

"Your Highness, excuse me, Ensign Grayson. Should I be packing my sea chest?" Starling could stand before God and still be insolent.

"No, not at all. I've been assigned slot forty-eight, Dog flight. And you have your wings now?"

"Baker flight, slot sixteen." Starling replied evenly.

"Then I wish you good luck, Mister Starling." Daniel answered politely.

"Thank you, Ensign Grayson." Starling fairly dripped with venom.

"Just one thing, Mister Starling." Daniel wasn't going to let him sleep easy tonight.

"Yes sir?"

"I'll be watching you." With that Daniel turned and went off to find his Falcon and its maintenance crew. Starling could stew and simmer until hell froze over.

The demands of a vast war had strained all of the navy's personnel and training resources, Pegasus had very few experienced people and Daniel's maintenance crew was no exception. Falcon number forty eight's crew chief had been a junior mechanic on his last posting, the other two were straight from training. All three young men were wondering how fate had saddled them with an Imperial Prince and the Fleet Ace to boot.

"Here he comes, look sharp." Crew Chief Toomey came to attention in front of mechanics' Hienz and Barlow.

"Good morning men, I suppose you know who I am?" Daniel smiled and returned Toomey's crisp salute.

"Yes sir we do. It's an honor to be at your service sir," Toomey replied nervously.

"Thank you, please stand easy. We have some talking to do, let's all go sit down and get acquainted."

Daniel motioned the men over to the back of bay forty-eight, a low equipment locker provided a place to sit.

"I know you're pretty put off by this black jump suit and what's on my shoulders," Daniel began. "I make mistakes, I screw up, so do you. I will never use my title against you, if you mess up it will just be me in your face, not my title. If I mess up you can get in my face as the ensign that I am."

Toomey ventured to speak first.

"We don't have much in the way of experience or seniority when it comes to maintaining a Falcon, sir. Most of the crews here don't have much more than basic Falcon maintenance training. We'll do our very best for you sir, that may not be a whole lot."

"Among the four of us I think we can keep the bird flying," Daniel explained, "if not we will all be standing together and explaining our shortcomings to Commander Ky. I'll do my best by you all, any problems you have talk to me first. If I can't solve them we'll find someone who can."

It was a pretty good beginning for Falcon Forty-Eight's pilot and crew, the three ratings loosened up enough to speak their minds, Daniel did the same. They spent the rest of the morning going over the new bird's maintenance log book and checking all of the system diagnostic readouts. Both drive coils were probably slightly out of sync, a common problem with new fighters, more of a nuisance than anything. After the thirteen-hundred briefing they would power up the fighter and check the drive settings. Meeting with the rest of the pilots on Dog Flight was also high on the to-do list, perhaps after the briefing.

Commander Ky began the 1300 briefing by announcing who would be the vessel's four flight leaders. There were exactly four pilots on board with any previous active flight duty to speak of. There was only one with any combat time, the one who was the Fleet Ace. Daniel was named Flight Leader of Dog Flight, his first command.

"Oh shit!" Daniel thought, he was almost in a cold sweat at the idea of commanding an actual flight of twelve Falcons. He would be responsible for all of their actions and performance, for their lives.

Ky laid out just what would be occurring in the next weeks, he did not explain things in a delicate manner.

"We are proceeding to the space around New Tasmania to conduct training exercises and readiness preparations. This is a new vessel with a new crew, a great deal of fucking up will occur by all concerned." Ky paused until the laughter died down. "Mistakes will be tolerated the first time they are made, if the mistakes are repeated there will be hell to pay! We do not have the luxury of time, the luxury of peacetime. We have the Snakes on the run for now, in war circumstances can shift very rapidly. We could be on the run if we ease up, if the Snakes have an ace up their sleeves."

Ky went on to detail what operations would be occurring upon arrival at New Tasmania, the military

training planet on which Daniel and Ian had undergone their cadet-candidate's obstacle course test. "Formation maneuvers, both attack and defensive. Ground attack tactics and coordination with ground forces. Hanger deck procedures, emergency launch drills, damage control." Ky's list seemed to go on forever, they would all be working very hard for at least the next six weeks. The flight leaders would be working twice as hard. No one was doing much laughing by now.

Ky's briefing gave mention to Daniel and the special pilot's wings that he wore.

"We are, as you all know by now, honored to have the Fleet Ace assigned to Pegasus. Ensign Grayson can be easily approached and even spoken to, please do so. Ensign Grayson carries the title of 'Your Highness' off of this vessel, while on board he is just an ensign, this is his choice." Daniel blushed slightly but he was glad for Ky's words. Ky continued, "Ask Ensign Grayson about combat, about tactics, about anything that seems important. I will also say that the next time you all are feeling cocky and sure of yourselves you might replay the recordings of Ensign Grayson's combat missions. Give thanks that he is on our side and that you do not have to face him in battle." Daniel continued in blush mode, still he felt some real pride at what Ky had said about him. Ky finished by directing the assembled pilots to report to their respective ready rooms to meet with their newly assigned leaders.

After the briefing was concluded Daniel went to Dog Flight's ready room. For a few moments the room was empty, it seemed a very lonely place until the other pilots filtered in. Dog Flight's leader was in near panic mode trying to think of something to say to the green pilots, something to inspire their confidence in him.

"Have a seat, people. I'm new at this so cut me some slack."

This seemed to have the desired effect, the twelve midshipmen and ensigns smiled and found seats as Daniel moved behind the small briefing podium. Dog Flight's leader pointed to the skull and bones that sat in the middle of his pilot's wings.

"This means that I'm very good at killing Snakes, it means I can fly circles around any of you. These wings don't mean that I know a damn thing about being a Flight Leader, I have to learn how. You all have to learn all of that stuff that Commander Ky talked about, we all have to learn it. Let's start by introducing ourselves, tell me and the rest of the flight about yourselves." Daniel pointed to the nearest pilot and motioned him to stand.

"Midshipman Bowles sir, I'm from New Alberta. I can handle a Falcon pretty well, then again I've never been shot at or faced a Snake pilot." Daniel thought this a good and honest answer and said so.

"The Snakes are very good when they are centrally controlled and on the attack. They are piss poor if their command vessel is disabled. Don't be afraid of them, you are a better pilot than they are, kill them." Daniel pointed to another pilot, an ensign.

"Ensign Takashi, sir. My father commands an assault carrier, the Inchon. I grew up as a navy kid, I know how to follow orders. I too can pilot a Falcon quite well."

And so it went. Daniel finally dispatched the pilots to their respective fighters to continue what he had begun with his own maintenance crew.

There was so much to do, Daniel finally had to go off by himself to catch his breath and collect his thoughts. Every Falcon under his fledgling command had it's own special problems, every pilot had their own special needs. It seemed like a million small problems had fallen at once on Daniel's shoulders. Lieutenant Commander Ky came upon Daniel sitting alone in the deserted briefing room.

"Problems, Ensign Grayson?" Ky asked quietly.

Daniel snapped out of his private thoughts and stood to face his superior.

"Sir, problems are all I seem to have right now. I want to get things moving along in the right direction and all, but I keep getting bogged down with a million details." Daniel hated having to express his problems to Ky or anyone else.

"Welcome to command, Ensign Grayson. The higher you rise in the ranks the less peace of mind you will

have. Do your best, learn to delegate tasks, learn to kick ass where it's needed. You don't have to solve every problem, tell your people what is needed and what will happen if they fail to do what is needed. You don't want to be everyone's friend, you want everyone's respect and obedience."

Ky's words brought Daniel into better focus, he would have to be more of a hard ass when required, he would have to give orders and expect them to be carried out.

"Yes sir, I'll try to be more..."

Ky interrupted, "Don't try, Ensign, just do it!"

"Yes sir." Daniel would have to do more than just be a good pilot, he would have to be a good leader.

## Chapter Two

### Command

Three weeks had passed since Daniel had been named as a Flight leader, he was worn a bit thin by now. Ensign Walther was at the moment trying to explain to Daniel just why his Falcon had the worst readiness record and why he had scrubbed on the last training mission.

"My maintenance crew is hopeless, they take forever with the simplest jobs!"

"I've watched you with them, you have them too spooked about making mistakes. They triple check everything and then check again." Daniel tried to keep his voice even and calm.

"So what do I do, work on the bird myself?" Walther was a bit too much by the book, officers didn't do maintenance work (in theory).

"Do exactly that! Get your hands dirty and help them out, don't be such a proper officer! Talk to your men like they were actual people. I help out where I can on my bird and I outrank everyone in the damned fleet!" Daniel rarely made mention of his title but now seemed a good time.

"Yes sir!" Walther braced and stalked off to digest what his flight leader had told him. Maybe it had sunk in, if not Daniel would really get on his case.

Live fire ground attack training began tomorrow in coordination with marine training units on New Tasmania. There would be very little room for mistakes during these missions, pick the wrong target and marines could get killed. Daniel had nightmares about it. What if one of his flight screwed up? What if he screwed up? Ky was pushing everyone in Flight Operations very hard, Daniel was giving it his all and then some but he was running out of fuel, physically and mentally.

After a long evening of trying to catch up on the flight's personnel paperwork Daniel finally gave it up and took a quick shower before calling it another very long day. He paused for a moment to look in the head's small mirror, his reflection was of a very tired and worn young man not yet thirteen years old. There were distinct shadows under his eyes, he even looked a bit thinner from not taking enough time for decent meals. Maybe he was trying too hard he thought, maybe he could catch some extra sleep after the mission tomorrow.

Morning came at 0500 hours, far too early. A quick breakfast of an energy bar was grabbed before Daniel had to give the mission briefing to Dog Flight. It was straightforward enough, orbit over the maneuvering marines until they called in for air support. Targets would be designated verbally to simulate loss of automated target marking.

"This is a rail cannon only mission, be dead certain of your target." Daniel explained what they all already knew. "Abort any firing run if you cannot clearly see the target and the friendly forces. We'll be rated on our performance for this mission but I don't care if you all abort your runs if it means not killing some poor marine. Questions?"

There were none, they all knew the task at hand.

All of Dog Flight's pilots made good clean firing runs as Daniel orbited overhead coordinating their

movements, then it was his turn. His Falcon nosed over and accelerated toward the simulated Snake bunker, an easy enough run. It would have been easy enough if Daniel hadn't been bone tired from dealing with a sea of details and paperwork. It would have been easy if he hadn't lost sleep from worrying over every person in his flight down to the most junior rating. Halfway to the target Daniel found that nothing made any sense, where was the bunker, where were the marines? Panic gripped the boy for a moment, he seemed incapable of the most basic actions. Something told him to pull up, to abort the run.

"Dog Falcon Alpha, no target." Daniel's words caught everyone off guard on board Pegasus as they monitored the communication channels. Ensign Grayson had never aborted a run, never missed his target! He was the best pilot in the fleet!

Daniel managed to regroup the flight for the return leg to Pegasus, there was none of the usual chatter on the com. channel. What had happened to the Fleet Ace?

Lieutenant Commander Ky was on the hanger deck when Daniel climbed down from his Falcon, the boy seemed to move as an old man.

"Ensign Grayson! Explanation please!" Ky instantly regretted his words, something was wrong with the boy.

Daniel turned to face Ky, it took a moment for him to focus in on his superior officer.

"Sir?" Daniel slowly braced to attention.

"Ensign, are you okay?" Ky could see that he wasn't okay.

"Yes sir, I think so." In truth he didn't feel close to okay.

"Come with me, I think the surgeon needs to look you over."

In the medical section Daniel had to be helped out of his pressure suit, he seemed to have forgotten how the seals worked. A medical scan and the experience of the ship's senior medical officer produced a quick diagnosis.

"What's wrong with him?" Ky asked as Daniel was being lightly sedated and put in a bed.

"He's just tired, very very tired. That and he hasn't been eating enough." The medical officer seemed a bit disgusted with Ky.

"That's all?" Ky seemed put off by the doctor's answer.

"That's more than enough. His Imperial Highness isn't even into his teens yet. A person that young simply does not have the physical resources of an adult. Give him a couple of days rest and some decent meals and he will be fine. Push him any further and he may break, physically and mentally. Would you care to have to explain that eventuality in person to the Emperor?"

Ky paled for a moment before answering.

"Of course not. Do whatever needs doing for him, don't release him for duty until he's one-hundred percent. I'll put Takashi in temporary command of Dog Flight."

The Doctor had some final words for Ky.

"A lot of your people aren't much better off than Ensign Grayson here, you've been pushing them too hard. You need to back off for a while or people are going to get killed. Pegasus can't win the war by itself and neither can you."

Ky nodded in silent agreement, he was going to have to explain this unsettling turn of events to Captain Howard.

Captain Howard had given Ky free rein up until now to whip his flight operations into shape, he knew that everyone was being pushed hard but after all there was this small thing called a war. That the Heir to the Imperial Throne and the Fleet Ace was now in sick bay suffering from total exhaustion struck real fear into the man. Should the Emperor be notified? Howard had Ky 'on the carpet' pressing the man for some sort of rational explanation of things.

"Did you have any forewarning of Ensign Grayson's physical condition?"

"Everyone is tired sir, he seemed to be holding up well." Ky had visions of standing before an angry Emperor, an event that sometimes had fatal consequences.

"We've finished all of our scheduled training exercises. Put your people on minimum duty for a couple of days of rest. We have the option of shore leave time on Freeland, I think everyone has earned some time there." Howard had left unsaid what to do about Daniel.

"And Ensign Grayson, sir?" Ky asked.

"Let's see how he's doing after some rest before we send any rash messages to His Majesty." Howard answered, praying that the boy would be put right with some time off.

Twelve hours of dead-to-the-world sleep and a full bladder brought Daniel back to life, he stirred and sat up in some alarm as he realized he wasn't in his cabin. Dog Flight! What about the overdue performance evaluations? A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind as he started to get out of the sick bay bed. A medical orderly intercepted him just as he started to stand.

"Good afternoon, Ensign. How are you feeling?" Medical Rating Hawthorne asked with a broad smile.

"I need to use the head and then I have to get down to operations, I have a zillion things that are late!"

"No sir." Hawthorne said simply.

"Huh?" Daniel didn't quite grasp what the orderly had said.

"No sir. You are on total rest with full meals until further notice. You may use the head but then you are to return to bed." Hawthorne's business like manner left few outs.

"But..." Daniel tried to object.

"No buts sir, I'm in charge for now and I'm a whole lot bigger than you. I also enjoy telling officers what to do. Lunch is in ten minutes."

The large black rating was four times Daniel's size. The urgent need to use the head and the thought of an actual meal took away Daniel's desire to argue very much, besides the boy couldn't seem to locate his uniform in the room. A nude dash to his quarters seemed ill advised.

"Okay, I give up. Whats for lunch?" Daniel asked.

"Everything, you have some calories to catch up on." Hawthorne replied with a chuckle.

Captain Howard and Lieutenant Commander Ky came to visit as Daniel was polishing off his apple strudel desert.

"Ensign Grayson, you had us very worried. How are you feeling?" Howard began.

"I'm fine sir, I should be on duty. There's a ton of things that I have to get caught up on."

"No, your flight has already been rated number one for some time now. Pegasus is on reduced duty for the next two days, then there's shore leave on Freeland in five days. Get some rest." Howard explained.

"But there's so much..." Daniel started.

"No again. Ensign Takashi is wrapping up your paperwork. You have done an outstanding job, you just worked yourself too hard. In truth perhaps you were simply pushed too hard." Howard replied.

"Oh." Daniel felt like he had become suddenly obsolete or something.

Ky asked the big question.

"Do you want us to notify His Majesty that you have had a medical problem?"

"Oh please no sir, this is embarrassing enough already." Daniel's reply and attitude told the two officers that their careers (and lives) were perfectly safe.

Twelve hours before landfall on Freeland the now fully restored Daniel answered a polite knock on his cabin door. It was the diminutive Midshipman Peters who Daniel had first met when he came on board Pegasus. Peters and Daniel had since formed a small friendship despite their rank differences and Peters' rather timid nature.

"Mister Peters, come on in. What's up?" Daniel asked.

"Well sir, I was wondering, that is.. Did you have any plans for shore leave sir?" Peters seemed even more nervous than usual.

"Not really, there's supposed to be a nice beach set aside for the navy. I had half an idea to go there,"

Daniel replied, a bit curious by now.

"Sir, as you know, junior midshipmen aren't allowed shore leave without at least an ensign as a sponsor. Myself and two of the other junior middies were wondering if we might tag along with you, unless you have plans of course?"

"No problem," Daniel grinned, "I hadn't planned on visiting any of the brothels or bars on the 'strip' anyway. Maybe we can have some lunch later on and check out the Free Traders bazaar on the way back to the ship."

Peters fairly beamed at his success. "Thank you sir! Should we wear civies or our uniforms, sir?"

"Civies are allowed on Freeland, besides I'd like to go ashore without it turning into some sort of state visit. Tell the others that I would like to avoid anyone knowing about my title and all."

"Yes sir I will and thanks again!" Peters turned to leave as Daniel asked him the names of the other two middies. "Mister Carlos and Mister N'gai, sir. They have been authorized shore leave by their officers."

"Never a doubt Mister Peters. 0900, don't be late, have your military I.D.'s with you." Daniel answered with a smile.

After Peters had left Daniel sat on his bunk, a bit happier than before the midshipman's visit. A few friends close to his age would be nice company for some time away from Pegasus. Loneliness had never really left him since he had parted with Ian, he wondered how his loopy friend was doing on his research. How Ellen was doing in school. How the Murphy's family's farm was progressing. Daniel thought of the Emperor and the times they spent together, they would never be a 'father and son', but he did feel some true affection for the man.

At 0900 on the dot there were three neatly dressed young 'civilians' outside of Daniel's cabin, their excited chatter made knocking unnecessary. Daniel stepped out into the companionway and looked over the suddenly quite midshipmen. Like the middies, Daniel had on light slacks and a loose pullover shirt suitable for a warm day.

"All set?" Daniel greeted his 'charges' with a grin.

Three "yes sirs" answered as one, Daniel wondered if he was ever so eager as these three were. But then it hadn't been so very long ago in time that he was exactly like these three.

"Anyone short for money?" Daniel asked. As a royal heir he had an unlimited drawing account on the Imperial Reserve bank and could be free with his loans and purchases.

The three middies exchanged glances, between the three of them they had enough to buy maybe one decent meal at a mediocre restaurant. Their silence answered Daniel's question. "Not to worry, lunch is my treat. I have sacks of money, don't tell anyone if some of it falls your way today." There were strict rules about exchanging funds with other naval personnel, today the rules could be overlooked. Daniel continued his short briefing as the four of them proceeded to the main personnel hatch.

"Let's lighten up on the 'sirs' and 'misters' today, the navy will survive if we actually treat one another as friends for a while."

This was fine with the midshipmen, they still couldn't believe that they were going on shore leave with the second most powerful person in the Empire. They were also starting to loosen up some in his presence, much to Daniel's relief.

Something unknown to the middies was the fact that Daniel had a small revolver in his waistband, his loose shirt covered its presence. Freeland was a very new and rough place, its one naval base was even newer because of the war. Like most military bases, Port Sullivan had its 'entertainment' strip just outside the base's entrance. There was an endless row of quickly constructed bars and sex emporiums, there were few laws against such things in the Empire, let the buyer beware. Rowdy behavior was expected in such places, 'proper' folks avoided such areas. His prior life as a Free Trader had well-prepared Daniel to deal with such places, self defense was never taken lightly. Captain Howard had at first insisted that Daniel have an armed escort, something that had to be rather forcefully but tactfully declined. They were after all only going to the beach and maybe the local bazaar.

A really nice beach and recreation area was just four miles from the naval base, Daniel and his young companions opted for the automated tram to get them there. Peters and his two friends were all eyes and swiveling heads as the tram passed by the garish sin palaces, even at this early hour they seemed quite busy.

"What do they mean by 'Hourly Room Rates'," asked N'gai in all innocence.

"It's sort of a nice way of saying that the place is a brothel." Daniel explained simply.

"Oh my!" N'gai knew what brothels were, in theory anyway.

The naval beach was open to all regardless of rank, you only had to have your I.D. scanned to gain entrance. There were lockers and showers in the large clubhouses, one for ratings and one for officers. Beach towels were supplied at no charge, likewise sun screening lotion for pale ship-bound personnel. Daniel's three young companions did a big double take as they undressed and watched as he casually placed his small but powerful pistol in the locker with his clothes.

"I never shoot anyone who doesn't really need it." Daniel explained.

"We'll all try not to need it." Peters answered calmly.

The water was clear and warm, surprisingly enough this planet had fresh water oceans. The four bare boys forgot the world of war and regulations for the next few hours, there were no rank differences among them here. When they tired of horseplay in the surf there was the warm sun to doze under. After a while empty stomachs signaled their requirements for something other than grape icys' from the snack stand.

"I'm starved!" Daniel voiced the common sentiment.

Three "me too's" followed in short order.

"Come on, let's rinse off the sand and sun goop and go find some food." Daniel's lead was followed in rapid order.

One of the civilian locker room attendants supplied a suggestion for a place to eat.

"The Blue Shell has a good seafood plate, not too expensive." The man's cousin ran the place, still it was a very good eatery.

"Where is it?" Daniel asked, his Free Trader background told him that the man's answer was probably somewhat biased but mostly honest.

"Turn left as you go out the entrance here, then a half mile down the beach road."

Once again dressed (and armed) the four tourists decided that they could simply walk the short way down the beach to the suggested restaurant. The way was mostly tree lined and offered protection from the by now hot sun. They were halfway to their destination when one of the local civilian constables pulled up to them and got out of his ground car. School truants were a problem lately and these boys looked like likely candidates for detention.

"Hold up there, where do you all think you're going on a school day?" Constable Benton's tone wasn't very pleasant. Daniel answered for the group.

"Just down to the Blue Shell for some lunch sir, we're on shore leave from Pegasus for the day."

Benton had heard that ploy before from boys like this. "Then you have your military I.D.'s with you?"

In response the four boys dug out their small I.D. wallets and opened them for the constable. Benton took a close look at each one in turn. When he looked at Daniel's I.D. he stood very still before snapping to attention.

"My apologies, Your Highness! We've had a lot of trouble with school truants in this area. Again, my apologies." Benton looked about to burst.

"No apology is needed sir," Daniel answered, "but if you could would you keep my presence here today sort of under your hat. We all just want a quiet day ashore."

"Of course Your Highness. May I offer you all a lift to the Blue Shell?" Benton had started breathing

again.

"Thanks, but no. It's just a short way and we don't want to attract any attention by arriving in a police car." Daniel shook the man's hand and the four of them moved off to leave the amazed peace officer to collect his wits.

"He seemed about to dampen his undies," Carlos observed with a laugh.

"I have that effect on people, I hope he can keep his mouth shut about me," Daniel replied.

"What's it really like, sir? I mean... Being who you are?" Peters ventured to ask.

"On the whole I'd rather be hauling cargo for my father again." Daniel could now talk about his lost family without getting too emotional.

"Really, sir?" Peters couldn't imagine such a dull life after the one Daniel was now leading.

"Yes, I had always hoped someday to join the navy. Sometimes we get what we wish for, in the end maybe that isn't always the best thing."

The three middies were silent for a while after Daniel's rather sobering words. The restaurant finally came into view and thoughts turned to the matter of food and of eating some.

The Blue Shell was actually a very nice place. The low building stood right on the beach with part of the open-air dining area extending out over the water. The Matre'd was not overly impressed with the four young boys who ventured to approach him.

"Do you have a table for four sir, for lunch?" Daniel asked politely.

"Perhaps, but you boys might be more..." The man was interrupted by the unlimited Imperial Bank 'card' that the young boy offered him.

"Right this way, gentlemen. We have a nice table right next to the lagoon." Money has always done the talking, anywhere. Unlimited money screamed. They got the best table in the place.

The restaurant was having a busy lunch period, there were a number of naval officers, some with wives and 'companions'. Most of the clientele seemed to be local civilians with enough spare change to afford the prices. The sight of the four boys being shown to the best table caused some whispered conversations speculating about just who they might be and why they were here. One of the senior officers stationed at Port Sullivan motioned the matre'd over to where he and his wife sat.

"Those boys over there, are they middies by chance?" Lieutenant Commander Fawlkes could spot one a mile off.

"Yes sir. At least I believe they are although they didn't say so."

"Now how can a midshipman afford your scandalous prices here?" Fawlkes asked.

"One of them has, shall we say, sufficient funds sir. They are quite well behaved sir, they aren't being any trouble at all."

"Very well, thank you." Fawlkes still kept a close eye on the four boys, something about the one seemed familiar.

Daniel's three friends were used to more simple fare, they all were from working class families and the navy wasn't known for exotic meals either. By common consent Daniel did the ordering. Included was a request for two bottles of a very expensive non-alcoholic champagne, something that Daniel had acquired a taste for while at the Sun Palace. When the two bottles arrived in their ice filled silver bucket Commander Fawlkes started to drag his anchor.

"This is too much!" Fawlkes told his wife, "I'm going to put a stop to their nonsense!" Fawlkes' wife started to protest but to no avail as the officer stood and moved toward his targets. Peters first noticed the approaching officer and alerted the others. They all stood to proper attention as the officer reached their table.

"Are you lads midshipmen?" Fawlkes demanded quietly, not wanting to make a big scene in the restaurant.

"We are out of Pegasus sir, I'm Ensign Grayson sir. These are Midshipmen Peters, N'gai and Carlos." Fawlkes didn't quite register Daniel's last name as he continued. "Champagne is quite out of order for young people, you should know that!"

"Sir, the champagne is non-alcoholic," Daniel replied quietly.

Fawlkes was taken aback by this and pulled one of the bottles from the ice bucket to inspect it. Sure enough it was as Daniel had said.

"I see. It still appears unseemly to the other patrons, may I see your identification Ensign, I intend to send a note along to your captain about this." Fawlkes was a bit of an ass, even his wife would agree.

Daniel dutifully handed over his I.D. to the man, this sort of thing was getting a bit tiresome.

Name: H1H Grayson, Daniel VC DFC CL OS  
Rank: Ensign -- Flight Officer, Unrestricted Class  
Service number: 19812267-E(R)  
All Imperial Rights and Privileges Authorized

Fawlkes nearly passed out.

The three midshipmen dutifully suppressed their amusement (almost).

Daniel ordered a bottle of the offending liquid sent over to Fawlkes' table after the man had found his way back to his wife.

Four very well fed young men left the Blue Shell a good profit and a generous tip. After some discussion they decided on making their way to the Free Traders bazaar on the outskirts of Port Sullivan. Daniel longed to be among his own true people, even if only to take in the sights and smells of one of their trade bazaars. The innocent decision to visit the bazaar would be one regretted by Daniel for the rest of his life.

## Chapter Three

### Human Bondage

The auto-taxi had a robotic voice that had the boys thinking of a well-endowed sex goddess as it told them they had arrived at the bazaar. Midshipman Carlos asked the taxi what it was doing later tonight but got no response from the machine.

"I never have any luck with females." Carlos observed with mock sadness.

"It's because you're so damned ugly." This response from Peters was rewarded with a punch in the ribs from Carlos.

"Come along children, there are sights to see and we don't have all day." Daniel steered his small group toward a row of stalls crammed with all manner of goods, some of them mundane, some exotic to the point of being unidentifiable. A produce stand drew Daniel toward it, he had spotted something from his former life with his family.

"Cuss pods! These are great, let's get some to take back to the ship!"

N'gai wasn't so sure as he looked askance at the ugly brown blobs. "What in the world are 'cuss pods' for the love of God?"

"They're native to Oceania. They're called cuss pods because they're so hard to get open, you wind up cussing before you get to the good part. The good part is worth the effort." Daniel explained.

Daniel indulged in the ritual haggling with the Free Trader merchant before handing over his 'charge card'. The merchant was surprised at his young customer's skill in driving down the price and asked where he had learned how to bargain so well. The unlimited bank card also set off some bells.

"I'm a Free Trader myself, or at least I used to be," Daniel explained.

"Ah, well that explains it. What ship, young sir?"

"Gryphon." Saying the name was still hard for the boy.

"But Gryphon was lost when...." The merchant's voice trailed off as it occurred to him just who this boy might be and why he looked so familiar. Daniel's origins was a tale often told among the odd society of FreeTraders.

"Yes sir, it was lost." Daniel accepted the bagged fruit and started to turn away to his companions.

"Are you him, I mean are you....?" The merchant asked quietly.

Daniel just smiled at the man and nodded his head in farewell.

The Free Trader bazaar was a money making sideline that supplemented the traders' main business of hauling cargo. One ship might have several stalls selling varied goods and produce. Daniel had memories of helping out behind the counters, making sales pitches to dubious customers. There were a few 'tramp' traders represented at this bazaar today. The tramps were not part of the decent Free Trader society, they ran sloppy ships and often (always) dealt in illegal goods and substances. The tramp vessels had bases even further out from Imperial space than the Free Traders, rumors of lawless planets and the foul deeds committed there were part of their mystery. The tramps never spent very long in one place or on one planet, the Imperial authorities kept them under close watch and more than a few of them had their seedy vessels seized. Still they persisted, there was always an underground market for forbidden items in any civilization.

A large patched tent advertising exotic sights and goods caught Peters' attention.

"Let's check this one out!"

Daniel wasn't so sure, the place had 'tramp' written all over it and tramps were always trouble. His three charges were into the tent before a firm 'no' could be voiced.

"Shit!" Daniel followed the three junior middies into the dim light and musty smells of the tent.

"Good day laddies!" The short and very fat woman waddled toward the clot of boys, their eyes not yet used to the dim light. "And how may I be of service to you handsome gentlemen today?"

"Uh, we were just looking around, ma'am." Carlos' reply sounded just as unsure as he felt. The place had all manner of bottles and small boxes. Odd things floated in jars of murky fluid.

The proprietor of the collection of legal, quasi-legal and downright forbidden products was doing a quick appraisal of the four boys. They seemed disgustingly healthy and appeared intelligent, not too old to be a big problem, maybe they were even midshipmen from the naval base. So much the better, the navy had high standards. They would be prime specimens for the auction block back on the outlaw world known only as 'Bones'. "Now just play it right," the hag thought, "get them into the back for Binks to do for them."

"Come on guys, we should go." Daniel liked this place even less from on the inside.

"Don't be in such a rush, boys. The best part of my humble shop is in the back, away from shall we say, 'prying eyes' and curious constables."

"What do you.. What are you selling back there?" Peters asked in an almost squeaky voice.

"Wonders and items to delight, come and see." The obese and oddly draped woman motioned them to follow her, her manner had an almost hypnotic effect that was hard to resist. Even Daniel was intrigued by her sales pitch, another part of him wanted to bolt for the entrance.

"Come on, nothing will bite you brave lads, have a quick see."

Daniel followed his excited and curious friends through the heavy curtains and into an even darker area. There were four sharp snapping sounds and then Daniel felt a stinging sensation on his chest. He tried to turn and attempted to shove Peters toward the entrance to the room, he only succeeded in falling to the dirty carpet before passing out.

"Get the carryall backed up and then get them loaded!" barked the woman, "They'll make this trip a very profitable one! Take them straight to the Penelope, toss everything on them into the converter tank and have that sot Clarke cut out their I.D. chips. Tell him to do a neat and proper job of it and to use healing gel, we want this lot to be pretty and unmarked for the block. Get the crew back here and fold up this place, the sooner we're off-planet with them and the others the better."

Binks said nothing and just nodded his head in agreement, he knew the whole routine. Binks couldn't say anything anyway, his tongue had been 'removed' when he was sixteen.

-----

Daniel and the three midshipmen were dumped in an untidy heap on the filthy main cargo deck of the small tramp vessel, the effect of the slowly dissolving sleep darts would last another twelve hours or more. Practiced hands emptied their pockets and then stripped them bare. As ordered all of their possessions went straight into the vessel's mass converter processing tank, save for the pistol that Daniel carried. No one bothered to read the military I.D.'s. If they had read the names on the I.D.'s the four boys would have followed their clothes and possessions into the tank. The tramps would want no part of kidnapping the heir to the Imperial Throne.

Like so many sacks of produce the four boys were carried to what served as a medical treatment area. The somewhat unsteady ex-navy medical rating used what resembled sharpened and pointed pliers to remove the small implanted chips in the boy's shoulders. A compact scanning viewscreen guided his shaky hands in the bloody process. Clear healing gel was forced into the raw openings, a protective film would soon dry and form a lasting dressing until the skin closed over. It would still be very painful when they woke up, you didn't waste painkillers on this vessel. The boys would wake up to a scene right out of some historical vid, they would be in chains. They would be slaves.

A nightmare about a white hot poker pushed Daniel back to awareness, except it wasn't a dream. "Oh shit oh shit shit shit!" Daniel struggled to sit up, his eyes trying to focus, his shoulder was on fire. He sat still for a few moments, the pain seemed to have lessened a bit after he sat up. After a while Daniel took stock of his surroundings. Peters, Carlos and N'gai were lying on the deck to the right of him, they were as naked as he was, their shoulders pierced and bloody looking like his. A chain circled each boy's right ankle, secured with some sort of lock. The other end of the chain appeared to be welded to the metal deck. It looked as if they were in some sort of large cargo pod, other figures could be made out in the dim light.

"Are you all right?" Asked a small voice off to his left. The poor light made it hard to see clearly. Daniel's eyes finally focused on a young girl, maybe his age or even younger.

"My shoulder hurts. Who are you?" Daniel answered quietly.

"Samantha Evers. I was at the bazaar, then I woke up here. Do you know where we are?"

It was slowly dawning on Daniel just what had happened and where they probably were now.

"I think this may be a tramp vessel, I guess we've been kidnapped or something. Are you all right?"

"My head feels funny. I don't have any clothes." The girl seemed very small and lost. She was.

"They took all of our clothes too. This is awful." Daniel felt a cold fear growing in his middle. These tramps must be slavers, something only rumored about in decent society, all too real here.

"What's your name?" Samantha asked.

"D... John, my name is John." It suddenly occurred to Daniel that he'd better be someone else from now on.

Daniel's three companions began stirring, hurting as bad as he was. He urged them to sit up like he had, and like with him the pain lessened some. Peters was the first to make much sense.

"What the fuck happened?" Peters was a bit plain spoken in moments of extreme discomfort.

"We were kidnaped, they seem to have removed our I.D. chips," Daniel replied. "This looks like it's a tramp vessel. A slaver."

The tramp vessel Penelope had been in non-space for six hours now, where it was headed was in no Imperial navigation data bank. The Heir to The Imperial Throne was gone from all knowledge of civilized mankind. His absence was not going unnoticed however, especially on board HMS Pegasus. Captain Howard was having what can best be described as a 'fit'.

"I knew I should have insisted on an escort! How in the hell could he just vanish, all four of them?"

"The whole planet is on alert sir, Port Sullivan is literally being turned inside out, all vessels are grounded until further notice." Howard's executive officer was just repeating old news.

"We can't delay any longer, draft a flash message directly to His Majesty. Keep it simple and straightforward, include everything we know. Let me see it before you send it. God help us if that boy is harmed or dead!"

Indeed God help them, the Emperor wasn't known for his tolerance and mercy. The Emperor would have understood Daniel's loss to enemy action, but certainly not his being totally misplaced.

### The Sun Palace

The Emperor's personal secretary truly feared for his own safety. He carried the printout of Captain Howard's flash message and knew the response it would provoke. The hallway to His Majesty's bedroom seemed miles long.

Indeed His Majesty was not amused. A three-thousand year old vase shattered into as many pieces, the secretary did manage a neat sidestep.

"Get the Fleet Admiral! Tell him to get his fat ass before Us immediately!" The Emperor had a look in his eyes that told the secretary that a great many people would be losing sleep for a very long time, perhaps some of them would lose more than just their sleep.

### Penelope, day twelve.

As a practical matter there were no real reasons to keep the newly acquired slaves in such humiliating conditions, save for one. The spirit of rebellion and defiance seemed to wither some when you had to relieve yourself in a filthy bucket with no privacy from the eyes of either sex. Scrabbling for tossed scraps of food also took one's dignity down a notch. Having to be constantly naked and unwashed completed the desired conditioning to what would be a life of subjugation and obedience. Then there were the rats and cockroaches and pests from a hundred worlds.

It all just made Daniel very, very mad.

There were a total of sixteen lost souls who were the most profitable part of Penelope's cargo, none were older than fifteen. A young and healthy person brought better prices by far than older and less pliant adults. There were at first many tears, than the dull acceptance of lost hope. Daniel managed to keep his three middies and Samantha from losing all of their hope and wits. Of late they had taken up 'roach racing', there was no lacking of steeds to wager on. The current prize was a piece of apple that Daniel had managed to snag in the daily food scrabble.

The race course was a three foot circle scratched in the crusty surface of the deck. There was sufficient chain for everyone to sit close enough to watch the contest. By now the young people had mostly given up on the concept of modesty. Samantha bug was the favorite to win, she kept it under her metal water cup, it's name was Herbert.

Herbert would have been an easy win if Binks hadn't passed by at that moment and squashed him. Samantha broke out in tears at the loss of her pet, Daniel lunged at Binks but his ankle chain crashed him

painfully to the deck. Binks made an odd noise, it was a person without a tongue laughing.  
Shit!

Day twenty-three

A low rumble told Daniel and the midshipmen that Penelope had entered normal space once again. But just where in normal space could they possibly be? Slavery was prohibited in the Empire.

"Stand!"

The crewman who was screaming at them held an electric 'starter', something that Daniel and the midshipmen knew about. More instructions were forthcoming.

"You will take a shower, one at a time. You will then be taken to the main cargo deck, one at a time.

Give me any trouble and you will curse your mother for giving birth to you!"

That was plain enough. No one cared to find out if he were lying.

The harsh soap and scalding hot shower felt like heaven! Daniel's skin resumed its normal coloration, although a bit paler than usual. His shoulder was smooth where the implant had been removed, the healing gel had done its work. Assorted vermin drowned. He had hoped for some clothing and asked about it.

"Don't we get anything to wear?"

"Shaddup!"

Apparently not.

Ankle chains were replaced with having their hands handcuffed behind them. A fiber rope tied them all together, a noose around each of their necks. There was no running, no escape. Not now anyway. Daniel was midway in the line. Peter's, Carlos and N'gai were just in front of him, Samantha was behind him.

"I'm scared!" Samantha whispered, almost in tears.

"Just do what they say, keep your head up, you're better than they are!" Daniel was scared too.

The deck shuddered again, they were grounded! The gravity increased just a little as the ship's internal field shut down. The main hatch creaked open, a puff of clean cool air swept into the musty vessel.

Sunlight!

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Bones

Would have been a pretty decent colony if it had decent colonists. It had the dregs of the universe and it showed.

"Get your asses in the carryall!"

It was hard to do with your hands behind you, even with the short ramp. Eventually all were loaded, the rush of cool air as the carryall moved away caused them all to stand close together. Teeth were chattering by the time they arrived in the center of the mass of cobbled together buildings that was Morgan Town. The center square held the auction block, apparently word had spread that a new batch of slaves was to be offered for sale, a good crowd had gathered.

Daniel and his small band of frightened companions were kept waiting in the carryall for some time, at least the sun had begun to warm them. The fat lady from the bazaar at Port Sullivan seemed to be arguing with some gaudily dressed fop, Daniel couldn't hear what they were saying, just as well.

"We'll probably be separated," Daniel whispered, "do whatever they say for now. Don't forget who we are and what they are."

Daniel managed to awkwardly hold onto Samantha's hand for a moment, then they were told to get down from the carryall.

It was beyond humiliating. In the proper place like the beach or swimming pool nudity was something ignored. To be paraded naked like so much livestock in front of clothed and laughing human vermin was more degrading than you could possibly imagine.

There were two sorts of bidders this day, those looking for the cheap labor that no robot had ever been able to duplicate and those looking for innocent flesh to supply the many brothels. The bidding was lively.

Madame had her eyes on Daniel, he was perfect for her 'special' clients. The rest were deemed too plain for her needs, just worker material. She found herself bidding against the biggest paradise plant grower on the planet, someone who was a good judge of potential muscle power. Daniel's good friends Peters, N'gai and Carlos had gone to the narcotic grower, so had poor Samantha.

"What is my bid for this fine lad, just look at him! A magnificent young specimen, clean of limb, clear of eyes, properly endowed for his age! A perfect addition for the bedroom or field!" The auctioneer knew his vile craft well.

Daniel had been pushed forward on the platform, he was the last to be auctioned off. He felt like crying from the shame, he wished he had some sort of weapon! He wished he were dead.

Madame Simone won the bidding, she paid much more than she had intended. This young investment had better be worth it!

"If he doesn't quite work out I'll take him off your hands." The grower had seen the rage in the boy's eyes, something he knew how to tame.

"I will keep that in mind Mister Drake, but I think he will make me a good profit." Madame hated the grower, perhaps because he had more money than she could ever hope for.

Before Daniel was uncuffed at Madame's establishment he was fitted with a thin flexible metal collar.

"This is obedience," Madame explained, "obey me and no harm will come to you. Disobey me and you will feel this."

Daniel didn't quite grasp what she meant at first, after the blinding pain he did. It took him a few minutes to regain his feet.

"Do you understand me?" Madame asked gently.

"Yes.. Yes ma'am!"

"There are lesser reminders, to keep your attention." The woman pressed another stud on the small wand she carried, Daniel felt a sharp sting at his throat, not nearly so ghastly as the first lesson.

"Please!" Daniel bowed properly before the woman as he had been instructed to do.

"Very good. I think we have an understanding now."

Daniel had just one thought in his mind, "I have to get out of this place!"

The first order of business was to get Daniel more presentable for the 'clients'. He was provided with a simple lunch first, something that he ate quickly as if it might vanish suddenly from in front of him. A soak in a scented bath was next, even his hair was fluffed and sculpted. Daniel didn't quite grasp what was intended for him, a life in a decent society had left him somewhat ignorant of the perversities that mankind was capable of.

It was early evening when Madame found out that she had made a very bad investment. Daniel's first and last 'client' had made the mistake of turning away from him for a moment to pour some more wine, that and the mistake of insisting that the dear sweet boy not have to wear that "awful collar thing."

Daniel bashed the pervert's skull in with an obscene bronze sculpture before the creep could have his way with him. He would have made it out of the place if one of Madame's free girls hadn't been very quick with a dart gun.

Madame Simone took out her rage on Daniel with a whip for nearly an hour after he woke up from the drug dart's short term effects, only her greed stopped her from killing the boy. She could at least get some of her money back by selling the murderous little bastard to Drake! The boy's very dead client was made to disappear, no one save his creditors would miss him. A somewhat shredded Daniel was finally delivered semiconscious to his new owner's farm.

## Chapter Four

### Down On The Farm

Daniel awoke on a clean white sheet. Was he dreaming again? His first slight movement told him that it wasn't a dream but part of the ongoing nightmare that had been this last month. A low moan escaped Daniel's lips, he wondered if he would ever stop hurting.

"Lay still, boy."

Daniel blinked away the tears and tried to locate the voice he heard. A very white haired and wrinkled old woman came into focus, she seemed to be sitting on the foot of his small bed. She wore the collar of a slave and like the boy had been denied the dignity of clothing for as long as she could remember.

"Where.....where am I?" Daniel whispered, his mouth seemed very dry.

"You're on Master Drake's farm now, you belong to him. You've been whipped really bad, I used up about all of my healing gel on you, Master Drake's not gonna like that."

"It hurts." Perhaps Daniel's biggest understatement of his entire life.

"Let the gel do it's work. Master Drake don't allow me any painkillers here, he says it's a waste of money."

"Could I have some water please?"

"Sure thing boy, water I have plenty of."

The old woman was as kind as her life allowed her to be, she was the oldest slave on the huge farm and ran the sparsely equipped slaves medical dispensary. That there was any medical care for the slaves at all spoke not of Drake's compassion but of his business sense. Healthy slaves worked harder, dead slaves not at all.

After the old woman helped the boy sip some water she asked him what he had did to get whipped so bad.

"I killed a pervert."

"Do tell." Her eyes widened some at this.

"I was...sold to this place, a brothel. Madame Simone's it was called."

"Dear child, that sinful place! How long did you have to be there?"

"The first creep they put me in with was the one I killed." Talking seemed to help Daniel forget the pain (a little).

"Then good for you. Don't you tell anyone I said that."

"No Ma'am, I won't."

"What's your name, boy?"

"D.. John, my name is John."

"You started to say something else, John's not your real name is it?"

"Just call me John, ma'am. Please."

"John it is then."

Daniel slept off and on for most of the day, whenever he woke up the old woman was there. He was covered head to toe in the slick looking healing gel, it was doing it's work but he would carry countless scars for the rest of his life. One long scar extended up his left cheek and continued on his forehead, an eye had almost been lost. At least none of the brothels would ever want to bid on him again.

After Daniel had some soup spooned into him that evening he had another visitor, one not so kindly.

"I see I was right about you."

Daniel moved carefully to find the new voice, Drake was standing in the open doorway.

"Sir?" Daniel didn't know what to say to the man but he sensed that he had better be really polite to him.

"I told that bitch Simone that I didn't think you would work out for her. I hear you brained one of her 'special' clients?"

"Yes sir, I did." Better not lie to this guy.

"You will call me Master Drake from now on, forget and you get hurt. Understand?" The man's voice was almost a hiss.

"Yes s..Yes Master Drake."

"Good boy." The man paused for a moment before continuing. "You get another day or two in here then you go to work, or as soon as those cuts are skinned over. Work hard and follow the rules and you'll get by. Give me any problems and, well you already know what it will feel like, don't you?"

"Yes Master Drake, I do."

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Early on in the search for Daniel it was learned that a tramp vessel had left Port Sullivan in the right time frame before all traffic had been halted. Further digging named the vessel in question as the Penelope, a vessel already on the Empire's shit list for former trade violations. Interrogation of a Free Trader merchant had positively put Daniel and his three charges at the bazaar, close to where a tent-shop from Penelope was erected. A ten-year-old girl, one Samantha Evers had also gone missing from the same bazaar that day.

A very discreet watch was set at every port on every planet in the New Empire. Captains of Free Trader vessels were privately briefed and sworn to secrecy, they too would keep a careful watch. Sooner or later the Penelope would continue her foul trade, the vessel would make port in the Empire somewhere, sometime. News of the Imperial Prince's disappearance was kept confined to the colony of Freeland, if the slavers knew the identity of their captive they would dispose of the 'evidence'.

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Daniel was put to work bedding plant seedlings on the third day since his arrival at the farm. As predicted his cuts had closed over and continued to heal. It still hurt like hell to move around but the light work was within the boy's limited capabilities. The large covered shed he worked under was shade from the hot sun. Like all of the slaves he was denied clothing (clothing could conceal a weapon and gave one some dignity) and his chewed up appearance drew many stares and unasked questions.

Samantha was the first to find him.

"John?"

Daniel turned around at the sound of the familiar voice, the small sunburned girl looked like an angel to him.

"Samantha! Oh God it's good to see you! Are you okay?"

"Yes, what happened to you?" The girl's shock at his appearance was all too apparent.

Daniel ceased his horticultural efforts for the moment and hugged the girl close, he kissed her forehead before asking about the three middies.

"They're okay too, they have us working in the fields. We're all pretty sunburned 'cept for Benny (N'gai). I have to get some more plant ties right now or they'll sting me. I have to go for now, we'll find you again!" Samantha dashed off with a backward wave to the boy.

Daniel knew what the girl meant when she mentioned getting stung, they all wore the hated metal collars.

Getting stung was the lowest level of punishment, it was about like a wasp sting and it got your full attention. The collars did not administer a simple electric shock, that didn't hurt enough. Instead the thin flexible bands produced a sort of nerve induction effect. The nervous system was told it was being hurt, the brain believed it, so did the mind. Possessing such devices was an automatic death sentence within the New Empire.

Dinner was 'served' as the sun touched the horizon. Daniel's day had been an eternity but he had survived it. During the long day the boy had noticed that not many words were exchanged between the older slaves, little advice was offered to him from the others in the seedling shed. Following the others example Daniel queued up at the mobile dinner wagon that had arrived at the shed. A shaped metal tray was his dinner service, his fingers were his utensils, the bare ground served as a table. The food was mostly vegetables of some sort with a few bits of mystery meat for flavor. Hard coarse bread soaked up all of the liquid, nothing went to waste.

After the simple meal Daniel stacked his tray with the others. All of the other slaves then seemed to wander off in different directions. The tired and confused boy was left standing alone by the shed. What to do? Where to go? An answer was forthcoming.

"You! Get to your hut!" The shed overseer seemed ready with his punishment wand. By now Daniel knew the proper response and bowed his head toward the huge man.

"Please forgive me sir! Where should I go?"

The overseer noted the correct reply from the new boy and held off pressing the stud on his wand.

"Find a hut! Look around, they're all over the fucking place!"

"Thank you sir!" Daniel moved off at his best speed, the direction was a random choice.

The farm was immense, slave quarters were small six person prefab huts scattered randomly across the acreage. Daniel tried several of the small round structures but there was no room at the inn. The exhausted and hurting boy had almost given up on his housing search when a familiar voice called to him.

"Over here!"

It was Midshipman Peters.

They were all there. Peters, Carlos, N'gai and dear little Samantha. They all tried to help at once as Daniel was led into the overgrown doghouse, the boy's scarred and scabby skin told them some of what he had been through. Daniel couldn't do much more than cry for a bit and it was infectious, they all lost it for a short while.

"What happened to you?" Samantha finally asked.

"I was sold to a..brothel."

"What?" Samantha hadn't a clue.

Daniel looked at the wide-eyed girl, how could he tell her about that horrid place? "It's a place where people pay for sex...they pay for really bad stuff."

Samantha knew what sex was, mostly. She decided that whatever 'John' said was bad must indeed be very bad. Still, there were more questions from everybody.

"You look like shit." This simple observation was from Carlos (Jose).

"Thank you, I feel like shit too." Daniel looked close to passing out so his four young companions gently put him to bed. Bed was a thin blanket and a pad stuffed with dried paradise plants, their valuable seed pods long since harvested. There was only a small everlite in the tiny hut to see by, the plumbing was outside in any direction you cared to take. A water jug and one cup rounded out the decor. The large number on the outside of the hut was eighteen.

Samantha and the three midshipmen talked quietly for a while about Daniel. The consensus was that their friend would get himself killed here if he didn't bend to the will of his new owner. The four young people had been instructed about why none of the slaves ever tried to escape. The collars they wore were a

death sentence if they passed beyond the outer boundaries of the farm, go too far and the neural inductors burned out your brain. Occasionally one of the slaves would simply 'go for a walk', deliberately triggering the collars to kill themselves. Sometimes suicide can be justified.

The morning siren always went off one hour before dawn, you had that one hour to hustle out of bed and assemble at your feeding area for 'breakfast'. Show up late and you went hungry, show up late at your work station... but you know what happened then. With the help of his friends pushing and pulling the stiff and sore Daniel made it through the morning routine without being stung. Their bitter morning tea was as always laced with a stimulant, the better to get them up to working speed. He was still assigned the seedling shed because of his physical condition, when he was deemed ready for field work that was where he would go. Parted from his friends for the day Daniel set about his endless tasks, his body loosened up as the day warmed, the pain lessened.

The day was like the previous, perhaps not quite as much of a trial. Work, eat a small noon meal. Work a lot more, have dinner, trudge back to the hut. This routine lasted for four more days, each day a bit easier to endure than the last. As he was lined up for dinner on the fourth day the overseer prodded Daniel with his punishment wand.

"You!" The overseer had a voice like distant thunder.

"Yes sir!" Daniel turned and bowed his head as required, you never looked the overseer in the eye.

"You go into the fields tomorrow. What hut are you in?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"Fine, go along with that bunch then."

"Yes sir, thank you sir." You said thank you even if you didn't mean it.

As usual Daniel was the last to arrive at hut number eighteen, he had the furthest to walk and still moved a bit slower than normal.

"I have field work tomorrow, I'm supposed to go with you all in the morning." Daniel's announcement brought some smiles to the tired faces, they would be together again. Samantha gave her hero a quick hug and a kiss to his cheek, Daniel had a brief image of Ian's sister flash before his eyes.

"What did they have you all doing today?" Daniel asked.

"Just more of the same old shit," Peters answered, "pollinating, bug patrol, weeding. Carlos got stung for forgetting to say 'sir' to Buttface."

Daniel looked at Carlos and offered a "Sorry" to him, the middle just shrugged his shoulders in return.

Daniel took note of the deep tans that his friends were developing to replace their sunburns, even N'gai's ebony skin seemed darker. Their feet were starting to toughen from the lack of shoes. Bathing was what you could manage in quick moments under irrigation sprinklers, so far Daniel hadn't been able to get near one of the refreshing sprays.

"I guess I'll get sunburned too, I've been in the shade since I got here." Daniel's patchwork hide would have to endure one more assault.

"Just don't cross Buttface, do exactly what he says and be really quick doing it," advised N'gai.

Daniel nodded his understanding, "Bad news, is he?"

"Very bad news, sir. Stay clear of him as much as you can." N'gai still had a sore ear from being clouted alongside his head, apparently for just being on the same planet as Buttface.

Samantha caught the "sir" that N'gai had let slip, there was something more between the boys than she had been told about.

"Benny, why did you just now call John 'sir'?"

All four boys looked at the girl in a way that sort of frightened her.

"She has a right to know." Daniel said, not at all sure if she should really be told about him. The other boys nodded in agreement.

"My name is Daniel Grayson, Ensign Daniel Grayson."

Samantha knew the name, the whole Empire did. But surely not ...

"As in 'His Imperial Highness', Samantha." Added Peters.

The girl could only cover her mouth in shock. Of course it was the Prince, she remembered the official photograph on her schoolroom's wall!

"We were all on shore leave at Port Sullivan," Daniel explained, "I spend part of my time serving in the navy. You know the rest of the story."

The girl nodded silently, she did indeed know the rest of the story.

"They didn't know who I was," Daniel continued, "if they ever find out we are all as good as dead. They don't want the kind of trouble that kidnaping me could bring to them if it ever should get back to the Empire. Always call me John, always!"

"Yes...John." The girl's quiet reply carried the tone of a solemn vow.

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One day faded into another, they were all the same. Get up in the cold dawn, work until you're bone tired at the end of day, talk for a while with the only friends you have, sleep. Daniel grew leaner and tougher, his scarred skin darkened like the rest of his friends. One morning he decided that he must have turned thirteen by now, no one had been near a calendar since leaving Freeland so it was only a guess. Daniel's body had also started to edge into puberty, perhaps slowed in the process by recent hardships. He needed a haircut really badly but there didn't seem to be any barbers about. He kept as clean as conditions allowed, it was the only bit of dignity the slaves had left to them.

Elsewhere on the planet called Bones the tramp vessel Penelope was finally getting buttoned up for departure, repairs on its ancient air recycler had taken days more than they should have. The fat hag who owned the vessel cursed at the expensive repair bill, if they didn't make a good haul on this run she may as well not bother to come back, her creditors had little sense of humor. She would better understand about people with no sense of humor when she made her first landfall on Yukon. Yukon was well inside the Empire, its ports were under a very close watch.

Even in the midst of degradation and hardship humor can still make it's most welcome appearance. The harvest of the paradise plants had finally ended for the current season, the precious seed pods carefully separated from the plants by the harvesting machines (not everything was done by hand). On the evening walk back to their hut Daniel spotted one of the pods that had somehow been overlooked by the sharp eyed overseers. Slaves were strictly forbidden from indulging in the many pleasures offered by the seeds. There were too many ways to get punished without violating that rule so Daniel and his small group had never been tempted to risk it.

The paradise plant was a hybrid, its seeds contained extremely complex molecules that did not lend themselves to synthesis. The seeds were normally pressed and the small amount of resulting oil was heated and diluted to be combined with a neutral base material. Ingesting even a small dose produced hours of euphoria and the sense of infinite well being, it was also instantly addictive. Biting into a raw seed had a different effect entirely, it was one of the most powerful aphrodisiacs known to mankind and produced no addiction.

Daniel didn't know any of this, neither did the other young people.

"Throw it away!" Samantha glanced quickly about but there was no one within a quarter of a mile.

"No one's around," Daniel replied, "let's just try one of the seeds, no one will know. Don't worry so much!"

Who could blame him, even tired slaves could still have a sense of curiosity and a need for some diversion. Daniel split open the soft pod and tapped the small green seeds into his palm. He then tossed

away the incriminating pod and held onto the seeds until they had finally arrived at hut number eighteen. The sun was below the horizon as the five conspirators sat in a circle looking at the forbidden fruit(s).

"You first, it was your dumb idea!" Samantha had perhaps more common sense than all of the boys put together.

By now the five had come to be like brothers and a protected little sister. Their age, a lack of clothing and shared miseries left no sense of anything sexual between them, nor would there ever be any such feelings. What happened to Daniel after he bit down on the slightly bitter seed would bring smiles to them all for the rest of their lives whenever they recalled the supremely silly moment.

"Nothing's happening." For a while Daniel was right, but not for long.

The others watched as Daniel (John) shivered as if a chill had passed over him. His eyes seemed to widen and a perfectly silly grin came to his lips.

"Oh gosh! This feels really weird!"

There is a certain part of the male anatomy that can at times seem to lead a life all of its own, Daniel's body was no exception as the powerful effects of the seed took over his circuits. It took a moment for the befuddled boy to figure out why Samantha, Peters, Carlos and N'gai were all doubled up in uncontrolled gales of laughter.

"Oh Shit!" Before Daniel had looked down at himself he thought that he couldn't be embarrassed anymore, he was so very wrong. His 'condition' persisted for more than an hour, at least he now had a blanket to cover himself. The others gave him little mercy, the snickers and giggling from Samantha was the worst part.

The poor boy would blush for weeks afterwards whenever one of his friends mentioned the word 'seeds' in any context.

His four companions had the good sense to toss out the rest of the seeds.

## Chapter Five

### Retribution

The short rainy season began on Bones, the fields were left to soak up the moisture. The workload for the slaves lessened considerably during these few weeks, they were even allowed an entire day off once a week. The rains were mercifully warm, at least Daniel and his friends wouldn't suffer from a cold winter.

A quick moving virus swept through the farm's slave population, fever and a racking cough laid low most of those exposed to it. After three of the older slaves succumbed to the 'flu' Drake sensed a business loss and finally bought and distributed antiviral capsules to his human property. Carlos was the worst off in hut eighteen, all of them were quite miserable until one of the overseers tossed in the small vial with five capsules in it.

"Take these, one apiece! Drink a lot of water!" No bedside manners here.

The capsules caused a violent diarrhea for several hours but they did stop the virus.

### Port Kincaid, Yukon

Penelope had been grounded on Yukon for eighteen hours, its tent shop already in business at the local trader's bazaar. The vessel and its crew were being watched as carefully as you might imagine, even more so. Two thirteen-year-old twin brothers and their sixteen-year-old sister made the mistake of entering Penelope's tent. The youngsters were fast asleep when the watching Imperial agents moved swiftly into the front and rear of the tent. Clara Fong (the fat hag) was in restraints before she could think to begin cursing. Binks moved a little too fast for his own good and had his lights put out with a well

placed gloved fist. While this was occurring, Penelope was quietly taken, none of the crew was expecting any company. The navigation records of the shabby vessel were intact.

The Empire now knew where His Imperial Highness probably was. A 'conversation' with Clara Fong clarified things even further.

"Did you abduct these four boys on Freeland?" The agent had placed four naval photographs on the table before the woman.

"I don't know what you mean! I'm a trader, not a kidnapper!" The woman's voice was starting to take on a whine by now.

The blue uniformed agent said nothing as he reached down and pulled a very large and amazingly sharp knife from its boot sheath and laid it gently on the table in front of her. While the terrified but still defiant woman was staring at the glittering knife on the table another blade was being drawn unseen and unheard behind her. Clara felt a gentle tug on her left ear and a slight stinging sensation. After her ear was tossed onto the table and after she finally stopped screaming her attitude was radically altered.

Agents of the Empire tended to ignore the finer points of civil rights in matters such as this. To be truthful there were no civil rights in matters like this.

### The Sun Palace, Earth

The Emperor's secretary was more sure of his safety this time as he quickly entered the private study of mankind's absolute ruler. The rather tired looking black man looked up from his reading at the approaching civil servant.

"They have the Penelope, Your Majesty!"

"Where?" The Emperor's voice was almost a whisper, a study in self control.

"Yukon, Your Majesty. Interrogations are underway, a full report should be here quite soon."

The Emperor nodded his head in understanding. "Alert the special flotilla, tell them to be ready for instant departure."

"With pleasure, Your Majesty!"

### Bones

As the rain ebbed and the days became more sun than clouds work resumed with a vengeance on the farm. Countless hard plastic support stakes had to be pushed into the soil beside each reemerging plant, their underground dormant phase had ended. Weeding had to be done by hand, the paradise plants were very sensitive to chemical sprays and contamination. Pungent organic fertilizer was likewise applied with back breaking hand work.

During a lunch break one of the oldest of the field workers simply fell over dead, whether from a bad heart or a broken heart no one would ever know. Daniel observed the event in the sort of dull acceptance that was settling over him and the rest of his friends. The boy did file away one piece of useful information, one of the overseers removed the dead woman's neck band by simply touching the base of his punishment wand to the metal band.

Daniel thought to himself, "There is a simple way to get these damned things off!"

One week into the new growing season the brutish overseer that they had dubbed 'Buttface' decided he needed a little diversion. Peters (William, by the way) was dutifully pulling weeds when the overseer gently prodded the boy's behind with his punishment wand. When the startled boy stood and turned to Buttface in the proper head bowed attitude the overseer smashed his powerful fist into the boy's face, totally flattening and breaking his nose. There had been no excuse or provocation, the overseer just needed a little amusement. Daniel made the mistake of rushing to help his bloody and dazed friend and was rewarded with a full dose of punishment. The powerful jolt left Daniel in a heap on the muddy

ground unable to even control his own bladder.  
Just another day on the farm.

Two Empire Class dreadnoughts, four marine assault carriers and two fighter carriers formed the core of the flotilla now underway to the planet known as Bones. Clara Fong was a guest on the flagship, HMS Thunder. The woman was extremely cooperative and would supply in person directions to the commander of the first landings at Morgan Town. She still had one ear and wanted very much to keep it. Clara Fong's execution had already been ordered whether or not Daniel was ever found alive.

Leopold Drake occasionally entertained some of his biggest buyers at what was known on the farm as 'the main house'. Drake's unholy business had made possible a large and luxurious home, a mansion by any estimate. A house built on human suffering. Preparations for one of Drake's guests were now underway, extra help would be needed for the lavish dinner. A few field hands would be tapped for duty at the main house.

Daniel and his four companions were queuing up for breakfast when their dull routine was interrupted. "You girl! Get over here!" Buttface was pointing his wand at Samantha, she obeyed instantly and then bowed her head before the monster.

"Yes sir!"

"Get your skinny ass up to the main house, they need extra help for the dinner tonight! Mind that you go around to the back door!"

"Yes sir!" Samantha trotted off as directed, she glanced back to give a small goodbye wave to her 'family'.

"I don't like this." Daniel voiced what all of the boys were thinking.

"It's just to help out for the dinner, she should be okay." Carlos' optimism was all they had to hold onto. The small girl that they had always tried to protect was beyond their reach.

Samantha did not return to hut number eighteen that night, what happened to her cannot be fully described in this text. Leopold Drake had concluded a very lucrative agreement with his buyer that evening. After his honored guest had left, he decided to celebrate with some rather pricey entertainment. Slaves were expensive, especially young ones. Samantha's pleas and then her screams were heard by other slaves in the main house, they all knew that not to ignore them would bring infinite pain. They did ignore the cries of a young and good soul, forgive them if you can. I cannot.

Morgan Town was being enveloped in a rain of marine assault troops when Daniel steeled himself to ask Buttface about Samantha.

"Sir, forgive me. Do you know when Samantha might be back?"

The disgusting collection of human DNA that was the overseer laughed and then made a big mistake, he told the boy what had probably happened to Samantha, in detail.

Daniel just bowed and said "Thank you sir." He stood still for a moment as the overseer turned away to give a stunned N'gai a casual kick to get back to work. Something had finally and completely snapped in Daniel's core, he would not live out his days with his head bowed to anyone!

"Oh sir!" Daniel called after the overseer.

The plastic plant support poles were about three feet long, mass produced and quite sharp on the end that went into the ground. When Buttface turned in anger to punish the troublesome boy he was faced with the brief image of one of the support poles entering his right eye to proceed then into his filthy brain. Daniel's slim brown body had grown hard and muscular, all of his strength was behind the thrust in Butthead's ugly face.

Madame Simone found herself facing an Imperial Marine Colonel and Clara Fong.

"Who did you sell this boy to?" A picture of Daniel was in front of Madame's eyes, an enormous beam pistol was pressing against her stomach.

"Drake! I sold him to Drake!"

Directions were forthcoming.

Daniel methodically picked up the overseer's punishment wand and pressed it's base to his collar. A thin pale band of untanned skin circled his neck after the collar had dropped to the ground, he was free. William Peters, Benjamin N'gai, Juan Carlos. The three midshipmen were also free in the next thirty seconds.

"We're all going to die on this turdball of a planet," Daniel explained in an icy calm voice, "they killed Samantha, let's try to make them pay for that."

They would have too if a marine landing craft hadn't almost landed on top of them.

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Daniel had only one vision in his mind, a vision of Leopold Drake dying horribly. All four of the boy's considered themselves as being already dead. They no longer feared pain and death, they wanted no part of a slave's life anymore, death would bring them peace and rest.

"Grab a plant pole," Daniel said. He retrieved the one still protruding from Buttfacet's bloody eye socket.

The four boys stood silently facing toward the distant main house for a moment.

"Let's go." Daniel started off at a fast trot, the rest fell in beside him.

Assault craft Baker six was commanded by Marine Lieutenant David Levi, he was the first to spot the four small figures running from an obviously dead body.

"Put us down right in front of them!" Levi's pilot sometimes took things a bit too literal, the screaming landing craft came to a rest just feet from the startled boys.

Peters, Carlos and N'gai just stood unbelieving for a moment, were they seeing things? Daniel only saw a large object between him and Drake and took off around the craft toward the main house. The wide rear ramp of the landing craft dropped with a muffled thump and Imperial Marines began tumbling out. The three midshipmen yelled after Daniel to stop, he didn't hear them or anything else, he didn't want to hear them.

At Lieutenant Levi's order, four of the marines took off in pursuit of Daniel. Levi then approached the stunned and weeping midshipmen, he had small photographs of the missing boys, these filthy and wild looking creatures didn't quite match the photo's, still....

"Names?" Levi demanded. No time was left for politeness.

"P..Peters, sir"

"N'gai, sir"

"Carlos, sir. You've got to stop him, he's the..."

Carlos didn't get to finish, Levi was screaming for the whole unit to run down the Heir to The Throne. Daniel sensed someone overtaking him from the rear and whirled to face his attacker. Private Dempsey came close to being impaled on the boy's gory plant pole and backed up some from the panting wild animal.

"Ease up kid! You're safe now, I'm a marine. Calm down!"

Dempsey watched warily as the scarred naked boy stood crouched as if ready to strike. The other three marines had arrived by now and gingerly circled Daniel. A slow recognition was penetrating the boy's frantic brain, he lowered his 'weapon' slowly. The man in front of him was indeed an Imperial Marine.

Levi and the rest finally arrived, Daniel still held onto his bloody plant pole. N'gai walked slowly up to his friend and gently took the pole from Daniel's hands.

"It's over now, we're safe." N'gai's soft voice brought Daniel back into full focus. Levi then approached with a small medical device in hand.

"Your Highness, I'm required to be completely sure. May I take a DNA sample?" The marines had been briefed that the boy's I.D. chips had been removed, positive identification was needed.

Daniel said nothing but slowly extended his left arm. There was a tiny sting as the device was pressed against the boy's forearm, he was used to stings. The sampler was inserted in a larger module carried by one of the marines, Levi studied the readout screen, waiting for the verdict. The device beeped quietly and Levi turned to bow before his Prince. As he stood, he spoke into his com. link to the landing craft.

"Send a flash priority to the flagship. Identification is positive, we have him, he's alive."

By now the sky over the hated farm was alive with Falcons and descending assault craft. Leopold Drake was cowering in the basement of the main house trying to find an even better hiding place, there was none.

Levi listened to instructions on his earpiece.

"Your Highness, I have been instructed to transport you directly to the flagship."

Daniel turned from staring at the main house and spoke for the first time, his voice held a deadly calm tone that actually frightened the combat veteran.

"Lieutenant...?"

"Levi, Your Highness."

"Lieutenant Levi, do you acknowledge my title?"

"Of course, Your Highness!"

"You will obey my orders?"

"Certainly, Your Highness."

"Then we have unfinished business here today. I want clothing brought here for my friends and myself. I want a pilot's sidearm and one hundred rounds of ammunition. Seal off this God-damned farm and arrest every overseer, free every slave. Arrest Leopold Drake, he should be in the main house over there. Do it now."

Levi was still issuing orders when the landing force commander arrived. Levi briefed the Colonel on Daniel's orders, the look in the boy's eyes kept the commander from putting up any argument.

## The Sun Palace

"They have him, Your Majesty. He's alive!"

The Emperor turned away from the messenger for a moment to compose himself before responding.

"Bring him home."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

## Bones

The marine force had prepared as well as any military campaign in history, among the items in the commander's craft were four naval jump suits, they already knew the sizes needed. The clothing and boots felt very odd to the boys, a portable field shower had provided some start on cleanliness. Haircuts could wait.

Daniel's orders had been carried out to the letter, thirty-seven overseers stood bound to thirty-seven posts. Drake was bound to a post facing his overseers. Ranks of armed marines surrounded them all.

It was time for Daniel to ask a question of each overseer, he held the compact revolver in his right hand.

"Where is Samantha's body?" Daniel asked the first sweating pig of a man.

"I.. I don't know what.."

Blam!

Daniel had to reload the eight shot revolver before he came to one of the beasts who knew where dear sweet Samantha was.

"The compost pile, he had her thrown on the compost pile! Please, Your Highness I didn't...."

Blam!

"Thank you," Daniel replied softly.

The assembled marines had watched the boy calmly put bullets into the brains of nine of the overseers before he had found out what he wanted to know. The three midshipmen watched horrified and at the same time secretly elated that some small justice was being meted out to their tormentors. The marines glanced nervously at one another, unused to such cold and calculated killing. Daniel paused for a moment as if deciding something, then he resumed his slow walk past the overseers. He shot the remaining twenty-eight as methodically as the first nine.

Drake knew that he was next as Daniel slowly turned in his direction.

Drake had been fitted with a collar.

"What should I call you now?" Daniel asked the weeping man as he stood before the monster. "Should I call you master?"

Drake could only babble and cry as a small child might. Daniel started with the lowest setting on the punishment wand, the bound man screamed as if mortally wounded.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" Daniel asked softly, he then held down the full punishment button until the thrashing beast ceased to respond. Another bullet in Drake's skull ended Daniel's retribution.

Even the marines would have nightmares filled with Drake's screams. Softly spoken accounts about what the Imperial Prince had done that day would circulate around the fleet for years to come.

Samantha's body was found, what had been done to the girl caused some of the combat hardened marines to retch and weep. Lieutenant Levi stood blocking Daniel from going to see the poor girl's remains.

"Your Highness, you can have my rank, you can have my head. You will have to kill me before I let you go over there!"

Daniel had enough of killing for one day, perhaps for a lifetime. He only nodded his head and turned away, he knew the officer was right in what he was preventing.

It was time to leave this sad place, time to take Samantha to her home. It was time to rest. The flotilla's flagship left for Freeland, Daniel and his three friends would escort the girl home, she would not have to rest forever alone on the cursed planet called Bones.

Madame Simone, Clara Fong and the rest of the overseers got off easy, a marine firing squad displayed the accuracy that they were famous for. Things were quite lively in Morgan Town for several days, the marines had supplied a firearm to any ex-slave who wanted one and most did. Eventually Bones would be abandoned, the slave masters were dead and few of the former slaves wanted to start normal lives there. One old woman did stay on until a natural death set her free, it was the old 'nurse' who had helped Daniel survive his whipping. She never took off her collar, no one could persuade her to. She was the first human to become 'property' on the planet, a small plaque marks the spot where she is buried.

Chapter Six

Scars

HMS Thunder carried Daniel Grayson, William Peters, Juan Carlos, Benjamin N'gai and Samantha Evers to the colony of Freeland. The crossing would take almost two weeks, it was a place far removed from Bones. The three midshipmen had fared better than Daniel, physically and mentally. The ship's surgeons were able to mend Peters' smashed and blocked nose quite nicely, he could breathe normally again and looked very much like his old self. Carlos and N'gai had no major damage to repair, at least none that was visible to the eye. The three boys worried about Daniel, their source of strength that had seen them through their time of trial.

Daniel had refused permission for another I.D. chip to be implanted in him.

Daniel didn't smile anymore. He didn't say 'sir' to any of the ship's officers, something he had always done despite his title. He had been sent relayed messages from Ian and his family and declined any answer to them. The Emperor himself had asked for a personal reply to his inquiries, Thunder's captain had to send an awkward message to the Sun Palace trying to explain why the boy would not respond.

Word of what had happened to the Heir to The Imperial Throne was finally released to the Empire. It was a very bad time for tramp vessels, even those few who had tried to eek out an honest living. The records found on Bones pointed directly to a great many respected names in the Empire, merchants, bankers and respected businessmen. The trade in the banned products of the paradise plant ceased. Firing squads would be busy for some time with Imperial house cleaning.

Daniel had a haircut, callouses were removed from his feet, proper uniforms were provided. Daily bathing and clean clothing became familiar again. Good food started to fill in his sharper angles. The mass of scars that covered his body and disfigured his face could be removed when HMS Thunder reached the vast medical resources of Earth. The scars would not be removed, ever. Daniel told no one but he had decided to keep his scars as a reminder to himself about how humanity could treat their own and why he was through with the Empire, and the Imperial Navy. He had no more to give to them.

One of Thunder's medical officers was trained in dealing with injured minds as well as with injured bodies, he pressed for private talks with Daniel and the boy finally agreed to it. The first interview didn't begin or end well, nor did any of the other sessions.

"What do you want?" Daniel's attitude was close to being impertinent.

"It's what you want that's important right now," Commander Blythe responded, "just talk to me."

"I just want to be left alone." Daniel's to the point response caught Blythe by surprise.

"You are next in line to be Emperor, how can you expect to be just ignored?"

"I'm going to abdicate my title and resign my commission in the navy. I can still fly a cargo shuttle, maybe I can sign on with a Free Trader vessel. My friend Ian's family can always use a good farmhand. I've had some recent training in raising crops."

Blythe almost managed to keep his composure but dear God how could he keep this private conversation from the Emperor?

"You have a responsibility to the Empire, to the navy." Blythe hoped to appeal to the boy's sense of duty.

"Fuck the Empire and fuck the navy and fuck you!" With that obscene outburst Daniel got up stalked out of the medical officer's small office. The man was frightened with the realization that he would have to eventually draft some sort of private message for the Emperor's eyes only.

It read as follows:

Your Most Imperial Majesty,

I have just concluded several private and most troubling interviews with His Imperial Highness, Prince Daniel. I have also finished reading the intelligence reports on what occurred to His Majesty on the planet known as Bones. I have spoken with his three companions also.

I fear that His Highness has suffered more harm than what first appeared obvious to his rescuers, more than just the terrible physical harm. If I might venture to be so familiar, the boy seems to have lost any will to continue in service to the Empire or to the navy. He has expressed a strong desire to return to a civilian life, a life without the demands he now faces. If I may be so bold I would urge you to try to understand what His Highness has been through of late. Flesh and blood have only so much to offer in service to the Empire, I believe that His Highness has given that measure of service and more.

If your humble servant has overstepped his position and given offense I do profoundly apologize to Your Majesty.

With deepest respect and humility,

Edward Blythe, Lt. Commander  
Chief Medical Officer  
HMS Thunder  
Enroute to Freeland and Earth

Freeland

Samantha was laid to her well-deserved rest next to her baby brother, the boy had perished in an accident when Samantha was only six. Daniel and the three midshipmen had stood with the family at the grave side service. Peters, N'gai and Carlos all had tears on their cheeks as they wept for their 'little sister'. Daniel did not weep, he seemed unable to and declined to say any words when asked to do so by the priest. After the simple service Samantha's parents approached Daniel with a question, they had been unable to get anyone to tell them how their daughter had died.

"There are monsters in the universe, Samantha was killed by a one of them. I killed that monster for her." With that Daniel turned away and returned to HMS Thunder.

Earth

Taking the advice of an army of doctors and psychologists the Emperor had agreed to a quite, low key welcome home for Daniel. Sir Ian Murphy was at the Emperor's side when Daniel came down the ramp from HMS Thunder. Just behind Daniel were the three midshipmen who had shared his ordeal.

Following protocol the three midshipmen bowed before the Emperor, Daniel caused shocked gasps to be heard from the assembled dignitaries when he did not bow. Daniel just gazed steadily into the Emperor's eyes. Daniel's appearance also was somewhat shocking, his once handsome face had a cruel scar extending from cheek to forehead, there seemed to be other scars on his neck. The Emperor moved forward with his hand extended, Daniel did accept this greeting and offered a firm handshake to the tall black man.

"Welcome home, Daniel. Our prayers have been answered."

"Thank you, it's nice to be here." Daniel included no 'Sire' or any other term of respect. He was through with bowing and using terms of respect with anyone, he was through with all of that.

Daniel turned to Ian and embraced him warmly, he came as close to a smile as he had in nearly a month.

"You're even more ugly than I remember." Ian began.

"Thank you. Did you ever get your planetary shield cobbled together?" Daniel asked quietly.

"Oh sure, just some fiddling to get right. Every colony in the Empire is now protected." Ian couldn't stop looking at his best of all friends' scarred face.

"Good for you then. How's the family?"

"They're fine. The farm's going great guns. They said that they tried to contact you."

"I know, I guess I'm not very sociable anymore. I should have sent them a note or something."

Ian nodded toward the Emperor, "We're being rude."

The two boys had been chatting quietly while keeping the Emperor cooling his heels on the tarmac.

That evening the Emperor had the time for a long talk with the obviously troubled Prince. The boy had brought along two wax sealed documents, they rested on the sofa beside him.

"You show no respect, have We given some great offense?" Began the Emperor.

"I do respect you, I just cannot make myself bow and say those words to anyone anymore, not after wearing the collar."

"The slave collar?"

"Yes."

"Do you see me as a slave master?" The Emperor asked gently.

"I'm not sure what I see you as anymore. On Bones we had to bow and show respect and say 'sir' and 'master' or we were punished. We were property, less than human. I told myself that if I ever got free I would never call anyone 'sir' or 'master' again, I just can't do it." Daniel's voice had risen some, he was suppressing a great building rage, a rage that perhaps wasn't too deeply rooted in logic.

"We think that you need rest and peace for a while, time to reflect on what has befallen you." The Emperor sensed that he was losing the boy's allegiance, or perhaps he had already lost it.

Daniel picked up the two sealed documents and looked at them for a moment before speaking again. There would have been a third document but the title of Imperial Knight could not be resigned or stripped away, not even by the Emperor.

"One of these is my letter of resignation of my naval commission, the other is a letter of abdication of my title and privileges."

The Emperor stood, a fury rising in him.

"You do not have Our permission for such a thing!" How dare you throw such an honor in Our face?"

Daniel stood also, not at all intimidated by the man, he was past being frightened by anyone. "I throw nothing in your face, I just cannot be what you expect me to be!"

"We forbid such a thing! Do not try Our patience further!"

"Would you have my head then, or will a simple lashing suffice?" Daniel's defiant and cruel words pushed the man over the edge and he slapped the boy hard across his scarred face. It was an act instantly regretted. Perhaps if the man had simply embraced the boy and held him tight for a while the course of events might have changed.

"Forgive Us, We did not mean to do that."

"But you did do it," Daniel whispered, his scar and face reddened with the force of the blow, "and you have to answer to no one for doing it. I'm sick to death of being beaten and tortured and slapped around by people. No more!"

Daniel turned away and left the man, he paused at the door for a moment before opening it and leaving.

"I do forgive you and I do thank you for all that you did for myself and Ian. Goodbye."

The two documents were left sitting on the large sofa. The stunned Emperor sat beside the parchment documents looking at them for a while before picking them up. He finally reached a decision, the letter of resignation from the navy would be honored, the letter of abdication was thrown into the great fireplace. Perhaps time and a different life would heal the boy's spirit.

Daniel returned to his rooms in the vast palace and changed into simple civilian clothing. He packed a small traveling bag and asked one of his worried menservants to fetch him some cash from the petty fund. As an afterthought Daniel removed his pilot's wings from his discarded uniform and tossed them into the bag. Newly arrived copies of his flight qualification tickets were also packed. Ellen's locket was already around his neck. His military I.D. wallet was left lying on the bed. A pilot's revolver went into his

waistband.  
Time to go.

One doesn't simply walk out of the seat of all power in the Empire without attracting some considerable notice. As Daniel neared the towering front gates a guard intercepted him and bowed before speaking. "Your Highness, it is very late, is there some service I may do for you?" The officer was responsible for Daniel's safety.

"Yes please, could you call an autotaxi for me?"

"A taxi, Your Highness?"

"Yes, and stop calling me that. I don't have that title any longer."

The officer made two calls, the first directly to the Emperor. Then he did call for an autotaxi to come to the palace. As the boy left the officer's deputy was finally able to ask what the Emperor had said.

"He said to let him go."

### The Hawkings Institute

Even at this point in history ground travel still took some considerable time, it was well after dawn when the sleepy Daniel finally arrived at Ian's lair. Public transportation would always be just an ordeal to be endured. The guard at the front entrance to the high security complex found himself arguing with a pesky and badly scarred boy who still looked somewhat familiar.

"Can you call Sir Ian Murphy please, he'll come out and vouch for me?"

"It's too early to do that and he's not to be disturbed. What's your name anyway?" The guard was about ready to call the local police to rid him of this nuisance.

"Grayson, Daniel Grayson. I'm a friend of Ian's."

Ian was at the gate in five minutes, half dressed and totally bewildered. There was an awkward moment when Daniel's detected pistol was asked for, it was turned over without protest. In another ten minutes the two of them were in Ian's small living quarters having a wake up cup of coffee.

The institute's security force was in a total flap.

"I'm a civilian now and I abdicated my title," Daniel began simply.

Ian choked on his hot coffee, his eyes seemed about to leave his skull.

"What?"

"I quit the navy and the Empire."

"Holy shit," Ian's voice was whisper, "so did I, at least the navy."

"What?" Now it was Daniel's turn to be shocked.

"I sent in my resignation a week ago," Ian explained. "I finally realized that I'm not really very good naval officer material and there's not much more to do here on the shield designs."

"Will they let you do that?" Daniel asked, still in disbelief.

"You know the regs as well as I do, any officer can resign his commission whenever he wants to except in time of actual combat conditions. There's certainly not much fighting going on around this place."

"What will you do?" Daniel asked.

"I'd like to go home for a while," Ian replied while looking Daniel in the eye.

"So would I."

Both boys nodded in agreement, for a moment there was almost a smile on Daniel's lips, almost.

"How much money do you have?" Daniel asked.

"Not enough to book two passages to New Albion, or even one passage." Ian replied.

"Could your folks send...?"

Ian interrupted Daniel's question.

"Father had a fit when I first told him I wanted to resign, I'd really rather not let them know for now."

"But the Emperor gave the money to you so...."

"No!" Ian's tone and expression told Daniel to drop the subject.

"We can work our way there, did you ever get any sort of engineering rating?" Daniel asked.

"I have my masters' ratings in navigation, propulsion and power generation."

"I should have known better than to ask," Daniel said. There was no higher rating than master class.

"What about you, can you do something besides blow up Snakes?" Ian grinned.

"I'm rated to fly anything that does fly, well any noncommercial craft under ten-thousand tons that is."

"That large?" Ian's eyebrows went up.

"I got in a lot of extra simulator time."

"So where do we go to look for work?" Ian's reply settled the matter, they would both be working stiffs for a while.

Daniel needed some sleep, for the time being Ian was still in the navy. They agreed to parting for the moment, Ian's guest could use his bunk while he was in the labs finishing his papers on shield theories. As Ian was leaving, he caught sight of Daniel undressing for bed, he almost wept at the sight of his friend's body.

"Dear Jesus, what did they do to you?" Ian asked softly.

"I was a washout as an 'employee' in a brothel, they took some exception when I killed my first customer."

Ian didn't know what to say or how to say it. Finally he just shook his head and left for his work station. He didn't get much accomplished that day.

## Chapter Seven

### Working Stiffs

A brief and very terse announcement was issued to the news services from the Sun Palace. There were no follow-up messages.

"His Imperial Highness, the Heir to The Imperial Throne, has this day submitted his document of abdication to His Most Imperial Majesty. May God bless Sir Daniel Grayson and may he find peace and happiness in his new life."

What the announcement failed to say was whether or not the document of abdication had been accepted and honored. Not a small omission.

At the Hawkings Institute other matters were being concluded, Ian's naval discharge papers had finally arrived. Despite frantic reviews of naval regulations and even an appeal to the Emperor, no legitimate legal excuse could be found to keep the young genius in the navy against his will. The Empire was a harsh and unforgiving power but it did honor it's word.

"So where do we start?" Ian asked as he changed into casual civilian clothing.

"Every civilian port has a hiring hall, let's get our butts over to Port Bremen and put in our applications." Daniel's knowledge of such matters was the result of growing up on a trading vessel, it was almost second nature.

"Will we have any chance, I mean we are still sort of young?" Ian was a bit naive about such matters.

"They don't give a shit about anything except what your ticket says, if you crawled in wearing a diaper they would hire you, if you had your ticket," Daniel explained patiently.

"Oh. Well then I suppose we're ready. Let's go."

There were goodbyes to be made, Ian's good nature had made many friends at the lofty institute for

applied physics. Daniel's presence made the warm goodbyes a bit awkward, his former title and his scarred face made everyone just a bit ill at ease. Eventually they were on a basic class shuttle to Port Bremen, the other closely packed passengers kept glancing at them as if to assure themselves that their eyes had not deceived them.

## Port Bremen

The hiring hall was a confusing collection of shipping schedules posted on large view screens. It seemed to Ian that all of the people standing around were as lost as he was. Not so.

"Come on, let's check out the ships heading into sector nine." Daniel knew what he was about.

"Lead on then, I hope you know what the hell you're doing!" Ian certainly didn't.

The two boys headed off across the crowded and somewhat dingy hall, a few startled glances from the other job seekers were to be expected.

Daniel paused before the appropriate view screen and scanned the list of vessels and their destinations. Bingo!

"There! The Rose of Seville, bound for Veldt and Polynesia!"

Ian stared blankly at the data on the screen, a vast IQ was no substitute for experience so he just nodded and followed his friend across the hall to the appropriate desk. The clerk had all of the charm that you might expect.

"Tickets!"

Daniel dug out his precious qualifications' card, Ian followed his lead and produced his own card. The clerk studied the cards for a moment then inserted them into a reader on his small desk. After he had digested the information on the view screen he seemed to have altered his attitude considerably.

"You're him, them!"

"Sir?" Ian replied.

"Your Highness! Sir Ian!" The clerk even started to stand up, Daniel placed his hand gently on the man's shoulder and stopped him.

"I'm not 'Your Highness' any longer. We need jobs, do you have any for us on The Rose of Seville?"

After a moment the clerk collected his thoughts enough to supply the information the boys needed.

"There are three openings for shuttle pilots, two in engineering, twenty-one in food service and house keeping. Dock Sixteen-A. She departs in nine hours."

"Thank you. May we have our hiring chits and our cards back?" Daniel looked to Ian, perhaps they had their first ride.

During the long hike over to Dock Sixteen-A Ian had a serious talk with his friend,

"You know that if we're going to land slots on the Rose you're going to have to start saying 'sir' to the officers, even if they are just civilians."

Daniel didn't reply.

"Well? Will you do that?" Ian continued.

"I suppose I will, but I won't mean it." Daniel finally replied.

"Close enough." Ian breathed a sigh of relief

## The Rose of Seville

Was a dual purpose vessel with both passenger and cargo capabilities. It was an Empire licensed merchant vessel and didn't take on any unqualified crewmen. Daniel and Ian had some trouble getting past the boarding ramp watchman, nutty kids were always trying to bluff their way on board to 'see the universe'. Eventually the guard realized just who was standing before him and called the Seville's bridge watch.

"Go on aboard, see the watch officer on the bridge. Follow the location boards."

"Thank you." Daniel remained calm and polite even though the guard seemed to have only recently learned how to walk upright and to breathe through his nose.

"This is a trim vessel, they must make a pretty profit on the runs between here and Veldt." Daniel had a practiced eye for a well-run ship.

"If you say so." Even Ian could see that the vessel was well maintained. Spit and polish prevailed.

Second Officer Brewster couldn't quite believe just who was applying for employment on his watch. The entire Empire was still abuzz with the news of Daniel's abdication, Ian's shield technology had sent the Snakes into full retreat and all but final defeat. And these two legendary boys wanted slots on the Seville?

"We have our cards here, the hiring hall said there were openings in engineering and cargo shuttle operations." Daniel handed the tickets to the man, he still couldn't force himself to say 'sir' to the ship's officer or anyone else for that matter.

"All right then, you can have the slots but we're very shorthanded what with the war and all. Shuttle workers and pilots may have to pull double duty helping out in passenger country during meal servings and such. Any objections to that?"

"No sir," Ian replied while nudging Daniel in his side.

"No sir," Daniel replied quietly, he had finally made that one small step.

"Come along then, Captain McCloud will want to meet you two, especially you two. Leave your bags here for now."

Brewster had the two boys wait outside the Captains day cabin while he went in to explain a few things.

"Sir, we have two more slots filled, one cargo pilot and one engineer. I think you will want to meet them in person, sir."

"That's good but I'm very busy, I'll see them after we're underway," McCloud responded, a little irritated at the intrusion.

"Sir, the pilot is Sir Daniel Grayson, formerly Prince Daniel. The engineer is Sir Ian Murphy, inventor of the Murphy shield. Shall I send them away?"

"Is this a joke?" McCloud asked, even more irritated by now.

"No sir, I'm quite serious, they're just outside right now."

"Christ Almighty! Bring them in!"

McCloud stood and came around his desk as Daniel and Ian entered, the boys felt a little like green midshipmen again.

"Welcome aboard Seville, gentlemen." McCloud extended his hand to both boys in greeting.

"Thank you sir," Ian replied, "an honor to meet you."

Daniel said nothing but stood at proper attention.

"The honor is mine," McCloud continued, "I must confess that I'm not quite sure how to address you both."

"I have no royal title now sir," Daniel answered. "Our knighthoods may be ignored, just address us both as you would any other crewmen."

"Very well then, that I shall. How did you come to be here applying for slots on this vessel?"

"We intend to eventually work our way to New Albion, sir. My family is there." Ian explained.

"But why must you work at all, surely..?"

"It's a bit of a long story sir, family differences and all." Ian replied.

"I see, then I won't pry any further." McCloud looked carefully at Daniel for a moment before asking his next question.

"Are you fit? There were some quite horrid accounts about what happened to you on that pirates nest they call Bones?"

"I'm fine sir just not too pretty to look at anymore. I can do my job, I know how to work." Daniel answered.

"I can see that now. All the same if either of you have any serious problems while on board Seville my door is always open to both of you. I for one have not forgotten the service to this Empire that you have both provided."

It was a good start, the Captain seemed to be a very decent sort of guy.

Daniel was immediately set to work operating a cargo handler, not much more than a flying forklift sort of contraption. It was honest work and it took his mind off of things best left alone. Ian reported to the vessel's chief engineer who immediately realized that the young boy was every bit as intelligent as the stories said he was. More so. There was little let up until the huge liner finally departed Earth, passengers had been boarding right up until the last moment.

Finally off duty, Daniel and Ian compared notes in the small crew cabin assigned to them.

"I could not believe the amount of baggage that some of the first class passengers had. One bunch had an entire cargo skid just for their crap!" Daniel seemed a little disgusted with such wretched excess.

"Remain calm, they're paying our wages. By the way we're supposed to get extra pay if we get tapped for extra duty," Ian replied, ever the logical one.

"In my case that helps a lot, they sure don't pay cargo pilots very much." Daniel was making about one-fourth the pay that Ian was.

"It doesn't really matter what we get paid, we're heading in the right direction," said Ian.

"They're sure to call me, there isn't much for pilots to do while we're underway," Daniel explained. "Most of the routine work is done by robotics in the dining rooms, except for the actual food serving. I guess it offends the passengers' delicate sensibilities to have a machine set food before them."

"Try not to spill the soup in their laps," Ian teased, "they get most out of sorts when that sort of thing happens."

"I'll try to behave, but the first fop that calls me 'boy' is liable to get wet." Daniel almost smiled again, maybe with time he would.

## The Sun Palace

"They have signed aboard the Rose of Seville Your Majesty, it's a dual purpose cargo and passenger liner. It's a well-run vessel by all accounts. Some very discreet inquiries were made, they are intent on working their way home to Sir Ian's family on New Albion." The Imperial Agent had been very careful in being sure that Daniel and Ian remain unaware that they had been closely watched during their travels.

"Very well. Inform me as you get significant information. Remain discreet. Well done." The Emperor turned away from the man, the interview was over.

## The Rose of Seville

Daniel was indeed tapped for dining room duties, he would be serving at the luncheon sitting. Ian's genius was assurance that the engineering section would want him on hand for the entire voyage. The Seville provided uniforms for the crew while they were on duty, Daniel's waiter outfit consisted of black slacks and shoes and a white shirt with a close cut white jacket. Black bow tie. Autotailors turned out the garb in about five minutes.

By now the entire crew was aware of the two more than famous boys who were now also a part of the crew. Word was slowly filtering through the passengers also, but many still were unaware of Daniel and Ian's presence. Daniel's first attempt at being a proper waiter was something of a disaster. He had paid close attention during his brief training session and truly intended to do the best job he could. Alas.

Harcourt Benton McVey was traveling with his parents for a visit with relatives on Veldt. Harcourt was sixteen years old, very rich, very spoiled. He was by far the rudest person on Seville during that voyage.

Your powers of deduction have by now told you who would be waiting on young Master McVey's table at luncheon.

Daniel was intent on serving the salad course, by now some of the other passengers in the first class dinning room had recognized who he might be, not so those at the McVey table. As Daniel carefully placed the elegant salad plate before young McVey it all began to go amiss. Harcourt had glanced up at Daniel, taking note of the scar running across his very young waiter's face. An insult was in order.

"Good God! Did they raid some sort of ugly show to find you?"

Daniel paused and counted to five before replying. He simply could not go about killing the paying passengers, at the same time he would not ever again take this sort of mindless insult. Harcourt's family did their best to ignore the awful situation, something they had done far too much of in the past.

"Kind sir," Daniel began as he leaned down close to Harcourt's ear, "I have not always been this ugly but I can tell that you have for your entire life always been a complete asshole and will always remain one. Now be nice or I'll have your nuts thrown into the soup pot."

Daniel rose and continued his duties, Harcourt sat stunned for a moment before jumping up from his chair.

"I'll have your job for that, you common piece of shit!"

It became very quite in the dinning room as Daniel calmly turned to face the furious Master McVey.

"I am of course at your service." Daniel's polite words were the age-old formal beginnings of a challenge to a set duel.

Captain McCloud was having his lunch across the room with a mining magnate and his wife. He rapidly excused himself and made very good speed across the large room. In a moment he had placed himself between Daniel and the irate young passenger.

"Sir Daniel, what is the problem here?" McCloud made sure that everyone heard the title "Sir."

"This person seems to object to my appearance, sir." Daniel indicated the red faced Harcourt McVey.

McCloud turned to McVey, by now the boy's parents were standing at his side. "Explain yourself!"

Harcourt had started to see his mistake when he had heard the title "Sir."

"He...He insulted me! He's all but called me out too!"

McCloud moved very close to young McVey and spoke quietly to him.

"You silly young fool. Do you have the slightest idea who *you* were insulting?"

"He's just a.."

"Shut up." If anything McCloud's voice grew even quieter. "That, you nitwit, is Sir Daniel Grayson.

Despite his presently reduced position he is still an Imperial Knight, he could kill you with complete impunity. He has killed before you know, many times."

Harcourt seemed about to wet himself.

"Now go apologize to him properly while you still have the breath in your body to do so!"

Harcourt did so, most profusely.

Daniel didn't have to wait tables for the rest of the voyage, in fact he had any number of invitations to join people for dinner and such. He politely turned them all down, so did Ian. He found other useful work in the maintenance shop, at least the people there appreciated a good day's labor.

Veldt

The Rose of Seville had a three-day layover, cargo operations were completed on the second day.

Daniel and Ian had a day of shore leave coming, Daniel wasn't too keen on the idea.

"The last time I had shore leave I wound up on a slave ship."

"This is a very old and established colony, tramp vessels never ground here," Ian wanted a few hours off the ship, some real sunshine for a change, "they have nice beaches, the weather is warm, let's go."

"I look like..." Daniel knew what his body looked like and didn't want to put it on exhibit at some public

beach.

"There's a hundred miles of shoreline, we'll grab something to take along for lunch, rent a flyer and then find a nice empty beach. It's that or wander around in the tourist traps here at the Port."

"Okay." Some goof-off time in the sun did seem very appealing to Daniel.

It was a very good day. The water was warm and clear, no one was within three miles, no sea monsters rose out of the ocean to devour them. They had some time to talk as they lay on the warm sand.

"So what do we do for the rest of our lives?" Daniel asked.

"Sometimes I think we've done enough," Ian replied, "if we keep on like the last couple of years we'll be really pushing our luck."

"What will your father do when we show up in civilian clothes?" Daniel knew how proud Ian's father was of his son's military accomplishments.

"I doubt if beatings will be forthcoming, I think he'll get over it."

"I look like shit, will Ellen want anything to do..."

Ian cut off Daniel's question. "Don't be a total ass, she would kill anyone who got between the two of you. Besides, I think your 'modifications' are an improvement, you've always been so incredibly ugly."

This last remark got Ian tossed into the ocean.

Daniel finally remembered how to smile. Life was easing up some.

## Polynesia

The place was basically paradise, if you could afford it. Almost the entire planet was devoted to tourism. Countless islands and clear warm seas covered the world, countless tourists paid dearly to be there. Ian and Daniel had been tempted to stay over for a while until they asked about hotel prices and the general cost of everything.

"If we spend every penny we have we can stay here about four days, maybe four and one-half." Ian had a certain aptitude for mathematics.

"Well shit! Let's go find the hiring hall." Daniel had almost forgotten how the 'common folk' had to pay their way. Living in a palace (when not a slave) could do that to you.

They decided to walk, the cab fares were obscene.

Port Wellington's hiring hall was quite a bit smaller than the one at Bremen, still there were a good number of slots available. All going the wrong way.

"Well shit!"

"You said that a bit earlier, it's your favorite expression lately." Ian observed.

"Let's go talk to the clerk, maybe he'll have some suggestions." Daniel began to think that maybe they should have chosen their ports of call with more care.

The clerk did have a suggestion, after the usual "You're them!" routine.

"There's hardly ever any ships heading that way from here, all of these rich tourists here have to be hauled back toward the core. There is one vessel here, a research craft." The clerk pulled a well-thumbed sheet from the bottom of his stack of papers. "Hold on a second, here it is. The Research Vessel Cooke, owned by the University of New Pretoria."

"What's it doing here?" Daniel asked.

"It's stuck. It seems what crew it had decided that they had a bellyful of the looneys they were working for, their contracts were up for renewal when they arrived here. They didn't opt to renew."

"Where was it bound for?" Ian asked.

"Let's see, here it is. N35467, doesn't even have a name yet, just a survey number."

"How big is it?" Daniel's brain was almost making audible whirring sounds.

"Let's see, seven-thousand standard tons. About as small as they come."

"Open slots?" Daniel's next to the last question.

"Pilot, navigator, engineer, six able ratings."

"We'll take it! Where is it berthed?"

The clerk turned to point out a distant clutter of miscellaneous craft and repair hangers. "It's way the hell over there, they couldn't afford a regular berth after the first week. They wheedled the Governor into letting them stay over there for free until they could get off-planet, in the interest of academic research they said."

By the time that the two job seekers arrived at the Cooke they had started comparing notes on what the symptoms of heatstroke might be.

"What a tub!" Daniel's observation was even shared by Ian.

"It does seem a tad small."

"A tad old too," Daniel added. "Maybe we should just sign back on the Seville."

"Then we'll be right back where we started," Ian explained, "let's see if we can do a deal or something. We'll get them to drop us off at New Albion when they're finished, they can pick up another crew there."

"Finished with what?" Daniel had serious doubts about this venture.

"How should I know? Come on." Ian tugged along his reluctant companion, any vessel was better than no vessel at all.

"Halloo!" Daniel's shout failed to get any response, the personnel hatch stood open so the two stuck their heads in for a look. They were surprised by a young raven-haired girl in shorts and a pullover shirt. She was perhaps fourteen or so and was beyond pretty and well into beautiful.

"What do you boys want?" Her name was Rebecca and Ian was totally in love.

Daniel ignored the word "boys" and held out his pilot's ticket.

"We're here from the hiring hall. I'm the pilot," Daniel pointed at Ian, "he's the navigator and engineer."

"You've got to be kidding?" Rebecca lacked a certain tact but did manage not to stare too much at Daniel's scarred face.

"Actually no, I'm not kidding."

"Wait here, I'll get grandfather." The girl left laughing and shaking her head. The view of her departure was as every bit as nice as the view of her arrival. Besides her ebony hair and blue eyes she had actual curves, Helen of Troy's younger sister.

"Tell them we'll work for free," Ian whispered.

"Wipe the drool off of your chin," Daniel answered just as quietly.

Professor Malcolm Hyde was a giant in his field of alien anthropology, he was also the most unorganized person to ever lead an exploratory expedition. The younger man who came with him to the entry port was John Hampton, this expedition was to finally earn him his doctorate degree, if they ever got off this damned planet.

"What do you lads want? I have work to do!" Professor Hyde asked impatiently.

"Sir, we are here from the port hiring hall. You have applied for a pilot, navigator and engineer, that's us." Daniel could see that this wasn't going to be easy.

"Don't be silly, now go away please." The Professor turned to leave, Daniel's next words stopped him.

"My name is Daniel Grayson, Sir Daniel Grayson. My friend here is Sir Ian Murphy, you may recall he devised the Murphy Shield that now protects this planet." Daniel didn't like using his remaining title like this, he also didn't relish signing back on board the Seville.

Rebecca's eyes went very wide, Hampton's did also, they had finally clicked on whom these boys were. The Professor was not quite so fast to catch on.

"What? What did you say?"

Daniel handed over his pilot's ticket, Ian followed suit with his card.

"Sir, you may verify these with the port authority. We are qualified to take this vessel wherever you wish. There were no crewmen available, if you accept our employment we will have to make do with you and your people as crewmen."

Daniel hoped he sounded convincing.

After the Professor checked with the port captain he did sound convincing.

They were finally hired on after some heated debate between the Professor and his students. Better very young and very famous ships' officers than no ship's officers at all.

## Chapter Eight

### A Fine Mess

There were eight people in Daniel's 'crew', nine if you counted Ian who was his equal and not really just a crew member. Besides Professor Hyde, his granddaughter Rebecca and John Hampton, there were five others, all graduate students. Michael Richter, Mary LaSalle, Edward Simmons, Jason Becket and Naoki Nakashima. Mary LaSalle also did duty as the vessel's medical specialist having been a nurse before getting bored with that profession. None of them had ever seen military duty, none knew a damn thing about crewing an interstellar vessel, no matter how small it was. A short lecture was in order before Daniel got down to work, and there was a lot of work to do.

"I won't presume to tell you how to go about your research. Myself and Ian are at your disposal to help you in every way we can to do what you are on board to do. At the same time I am legally obligated to do my best to safeguard this vessel and its crew. If myself or Ian gives you an order that has to do with the safe operation of this vessel it must be obeyed, if not I will take this craft to the nearest port and stand down from command. We will also do our part of the menial chores just like the rest of you, we're too shorthanded for any silly formalities."

Daniel had spent endless hours as a midshipman memorizing boring naval and civilian regulations regarding vessel operations, it was now being put to use. If only he could keep Ian from staring at Rebecca all of the time, it was embarrassing!

N35467 would be their destination, a brief and preliminary Imperial survey had revealed a vast complex of ruins that appeared to be of A'chon origin. The beings whose name was thought to sound like "A'chon" were gone forever from known space. They had faster than light travel, great cities and complex technologies, they were physically unlike humans, imagine a large furry crab. Why they were gone was the main object of the Cooke's expedition.

Before departing Port Wellington Daniel and Ian both thought it wise to go over the Cooke from stem to stern, it was an old vessel operated on a tight budget. Despite pleas from the Professor and the rest of the 'crew' Daniel and Ian spent an entire day doing diagnostics and visual inspections of the old vessel's systems. Ian's bottomless well of technical knowledge saddled him with the most work. Money was tight but the Professor agreed to stock some fresh fruits and vegetables, the vessel was too small for a hydroponics unit. Rebecca was dispatched along with two of the others to do the overpriced shopping.

At days end Daniel and Ian were comparing notes.

"I can't find anything too wrong on the bridge or with the shuttle, such as it is." Daniel began.

Ian had a long list of minor flaws, none would keep the vessel grounded. "There's some oxidation on the superconducting drive windings, it wouldn't pass navy specs but it should be all right for another year or so."

"I found some pretty nasty small arms in a locker on the hanger deck, what's that all about?" Daniel asked.

"I talked to the Professor and got a look at the Imperial survey report, there's some very unpleasant fauna running around on our destination. I plan on mostly staying on the ship when we get there."

"Oh wonderful, big animals!" Daniel didn't even care for horses.

"With teeth and claws, sort of like fast dinosaurs."

Ian really didn't have to add that last part in Daniel's opinion.

Daniel then called a quick meeting with the Professor and 'crew', they would depart first thing in the morning, they all needed a good night's rest first.

Both Daniel and Ian had their own small cabins, they were after all the officers on this very modest vessel. Daniel was in his bunk and was about about to turn off the overhead light when Ian knocked and entered. Even after the long day Daniel's friend had other things on his mind than just sleep.

"What's wrong?" Daniel had visions of blown drive circuits somewhere.

"Well, nothing really." Ian sat in the chair by the small captain's desk.

"I'm really tired Ian, spill it." Daniel got a bit cranky when sleep deprived.

"Do you think Rebecca might, you know...like me?"

"What?"

"She sort of smiled at me really nice today." Ian had a dopey expression, not unlike a young male struck with first love.

Daniel started throwing pillows, boots and whatever came to hand. After Ian had escaped, Daniel had one more thing to worry about, an engineer/navigator attacked by his own newly activated hormones. This was turning into a real mess.

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"Wellington port control, RV Cooke to depart." Daniel sat in the command chair on the small bridge, Ian was in the engineering spaces watching for any signs of disaster. Cooke's paying crew were watching things on the viewscreen in the common room, they were more than a little tense about their young 'officers' and their abilities.

"Cooke is cleared for vertical departure and standard orbital insertion, clearance has been filed with Imperial Tracking."

"Thank you Wellington and good day." Daniel eased forward on the thrust control, the Cooke stirred and smoothly lifted into the dark blue of the dawn. The vessel responded with all of the agility of an iceberg but Daniel knew to expect that, countless hours in various simulators had well-prepared him for the largest vessel that he had now actually flown.

Ian handled the switch over to the artificial gravity field smoothly and without even a shudder. Daniel had them in a predeparture orbit without so much as a tiny course correction. The 'crew' breathed more than a large sigh of relief.

"They seem to really know what they're doing," observed Mary LaSalle.

"Quite remarkable, actually." Even the Professor had taken note.

Rebecca was now even more impressed with Ian and Daniel, so what if they were a whole year younger than she was? Ian hadn't been totally off the mark about the girl's feelings, she liked boys of all sorts.

Rebecca was what would be described in polite society as 'sexually precocious'. Her father and mother had packed her off on this expedition out of desperation, to get her away from boys. This voyage was due for some major complications.

Ian dashed up to the bridge to double check the settings on the navigation unit. When all of the readings had moved down to zero he lifted a protective cover and flipped a rather unremarkable looking switch. Rv Cooke vanished from normal space, if Ian's settings were correct they would arrive near N35467 in twelve days.

The Sun Palace

"They departed Polynesia bound for N35467 as scheduled, Your Majesty. Our agents are unable to provide further information without dispatching a vessel to that destination."

"Understood. Maintain monitoring on all channels, keep me informed." The Emperor didn't like the

situation at all, he too had read the survey report on the planet.

RV Cooke

Once in the limbo of faster than light travel there was time to catch up on housekeeping and neglected maintenance duties. Between standing watch Professor Hyde and his group readied equipment and poured over the survey charts, something they had already been doing for weeks while they were stuck on Polynesia. Daniel busied himself going over the small shuttle craft that he would be piloting for the researchers. He was half inside an access hatch looking for anything amiss when Rebecca passed by and gave his butt a firm pat.

"Nice buns, Danny!"

Daniel nearly brained himself as he tried to stand up. By the time he had stopped cursing and backed out of the access space Rebecca was almost gone from the small hanger deck, her laughter drifting back to the bewildered boy.

"Danny?" Daniel repeated the girl's new name for him as he absently put his hand on that part of his anatomy so recently patted by an actual girl. It came to him almost immediately that Ian's love struck feelings would be shattered if he told his friend about this small episode. What to do?

Lunch was a communal operation with everyone pitching in to prepare the simple fare. Daniel took pains to sit as far away from Rebecca as possible, Ian did just the opposite and was sitting as close to her as he could. Ian looked like his intellect had dropped about two hundred points, especially after Rebecca gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. Save for Professor Hyde everyone at the table was aware of the girl's attentions to Ian, glances were exchanged, eyebrows rose.

Daniel was composed of flesh and blood and also found the young girl more than very attractive, he also still felt a loyalty and deep affection for Ian's twin sister Ellen. What could he possibly say to Ian to clue him in about Rebecca's all too easy ways with the opposite sex? Maybe Ian would cool down after a while, maybe Rebecca would find other amusements?

Fat chance.

Ian was taking his turn monitoring the drive readouts in engineering when Daniel girded his loins for a 'talk' with him. He prayed they would remain friends when it was over.

"Anything about to blow?" Daniel began as he entered the engineering space.

"No, just the usual wobble in the continuity sensor," Ian answered.

"There's a spare, should we switch it out?" Daniel asked.

"No, let's save it for now. This unit is just sort of tired, it's not unstable yet."

Daniel always took Ian's advice on matters technical, would Ian take his advice on matters more down to earth?

"Ian."

"Huh?" Ian seemed preoccupied, no wonder.

"About Rebecca."

"What about her?" Ian was now focused in on his friend's words.

"I'm not sure how to start without making you mad at me."

"Why would I be mad at you?" Ian asked, they had never before been really mad at each other, ever.

"Okay, here goes. I think maybe you've sort of gone over the edge about Rebecca, everyone on this tub can see it, except maybe for the Professor."

"What?"

"I'm light years from knowing a lot about sex and stuff, but I think maybe Rebecca is just sort of playing with you." Daniel could already see his friend starting to cloud up.

"Can't I have a girlfriend too, someone nice like Rebecca?" Ian was getting pissed.

This wasn't starting off at all well.

"Of course you can, I would never want to mess that up. I just don't want to see you..."

"I've never had a girl who really liked me," Ian interrupted, "I've never lived in a palace and had my pick of the girls like you!"

"Ian, the only girl I have ever really got to know very well is Ellen and you know how I feel about her. The most we ever did was trade a kiss on the cheek."

"You mean you've never...you know, been with a girl?" Ian cooled just a bit.

"Lord no, I'm thirteen years old just like you! Any time I was ever near a girl there were wall to wall chaperones. Every time I've ever had sex I was the only person in the room!"

Ian loosened up some more and smiled a little, he could finally see that Daniel meant well, he always did mean well.

"So what is your learned advice?" Ian was calmed down by now.

"I wish I had some. If you get carried away and Professor Hyde finds out he'll strangle you with your own intestines."

"Point taken. One more question, has Rebecca ever...you know, been 'nice' to you and all?"

"You won't break my nose?" Daniel asked carefully.

"No, what happened?"

"She said I had cute buns, after she swatted my butt."

"Well shit!" Ian was finally seeing the light.

"She called me Danny."

Ian had to laugh out loud at this last revelation.

Like all vessel's Cooke's small captain's cabin had a view screen to monitor all parts of the vessel save for private areas. Daniel got into the habit of sleeping light and checking the screen whenever he was even half awake. What he saw on the third day out from Polynesia made him see red. Both the bridge and engineering watch standers were sound asleep at their stations.

"Damned civilians!" Daniel muttered to himself as he pulled on his jump suit, boots could wait. He made his way quietly to the bridge where Edward Simmons was resting peacefully in the command chair. Still silent, Daniel crossed the bridge area and pushed a large red button on the command control panel.

On any deep space vessel there is a general alarm klaxon, no one with even marginal hearing could fail not to be generally alarmed when it went off. Daniel just stood quietly on the bridge, between the klaxon's blasts sounds of a general panic could be heard throughout the vessel. Edward Simmons almost needed clean underwear after bolting upright out of a sound sleep.

"What the fuck's wrong!" Normally Simmons' speech was fairly circumspect.

Daniel said nothing as he reached over to silence the screaming alarm. By now most of the rest of the 'crew' had arrived on the bridge, Ian had headed straight for engineering. Most of the people on the bridge had the same question as Simmons did.

"The bridge watch was asleep, so was the engineering watch. Do you people have any idea at all about duty and responsibility?" Daniel's quite tone held everyone's attention. He turned to Simmons as he continued. "All you had to do was monitor a few simple readouts, you could read, you could watch vids or even play with yourself to stay awake! Instead you decided sleep was more important than your life and the lives of the rest of us." Several people started to say something but Daniel held up his hand and finished his say. "I can't force any of you to do anything but I can promise you all that if even one more person gets caught asleep on watch again I will alter course immediately for the nearest port. It's no wonder your last crew walked out on you!"

Daniel just left them there to stew in their embarrassment and indignity.

No one fell asleep on watch ever again.

It was a very unlikely situation, two boys in charge of a space vessel crewed by oddball adult civilians. It did work after a while, when the researchers came to realize that Daniel and Ian knew what they were

about. After they had reflected on what both of the boys had been through, the decorations and titles they had received. The fact that their pilot had been chosen by the Emperor as a possible successor to the Imperial Throne and had then walked away from it. There was still the 'problem' with Rebecca.

They were two days out from N35467 when Rebecca slipped silently into Ian's small cabin. Ian had been very much curled up sound asleep when he awoke to an odd sensation, someone soft and warm was snuggled close to his bare back.

"Oh shit!" Ian whispered, an expression he used more often these days, so did Daniel.

"Naughty boy!" Rebecca giggled softly and kissed the back of the panicky boy's neck.

Neither Ian nor Daniel would ever possess the self control needed to make the short list for sainthood.

They were good and brave souls who had always done the best they could. Ian stayed true to form and did the best he could, which wasn't all that bad.

Details of the gentle encounter will be left to your imagination, Ian deserves some reasonable privacy at a moment like this.

Daniel could sense some change in Ian as they sat together having a simple breakfast of the last of the melons and some toasted bread with berry jam.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked, Ian looked slightly out of focus.

"Huh? Oh, sure. I'm fine."

Something snapped into place in Daniel's brain, it involved Rebecca.

"You did it with her, didn't you?"

Ian's loopy expression answered his question.

Daniel was pulled in two directions as he sat with Ian at breakfast. One part of him was mad that his friend would risk such behavior at a time like this, the other part of him was very curious about what it had been like.

"You're dead meat if her grandfather finds out."

"She came to me! I woke up and there she was in bed with me," Ian explained.

"Really?" Daniel thought that maybe this changed things a little.

"I was sort of, well...scared I guess. Then she started to, you know...to do stuff and then I sort of started doing stuff and pretty soon we were both doing stuff." Ian managed a slight blush, even with just his like-a-brother friend listening to him.

"Go on." Daniel's eyes were getting very large.

"Well, then we did it."

"Lord! What was it like?"

"It was totally amazing."

## Chapter Nine

### Fauna

From low orbit the unnamed planet appeared to be one large jungle, save for the oceans. Some of the A'chon ruins were enormous, large enough to be seen from orbit by the naked eye. Professor Hyde finally decided on the largest and most complex of the ruins for a landing and exploration. Daniel could find no logical reason to object to the landing site, there was what appeared to be an enormous, perfectly flat stone surfaced plaza. It looked very lush and peaceful from orbit, the reasons for Daniel's unease were the eyes that watched from the ruins and the surrounding jungle.

"Can you put us down in the center of the square?" Professor Hyde asked. Most of the group was on the bridge looking at the magnified image on the main view screen.

"Of course sir. Will you be wanting to do an aerial survey with the shuttle after we land?" Daniel replied.  
"Yes, we'll want to do a full vid of the entire site first before we proceed with a close inspection." Hyde's reply seemed to make sense to Daniel.

"I have been talking with Ian, after we ground we're both going to carry sidearms at all times, even while aboard Cooke. You are of course in charge after the landing, will you and your people be carrying weapons?"

"Perhaps, if we sight any wildlife that appears dangerous." Hyde seemed to dismiss Daniel's concerns.

"The Imperial survey documented some very nasty looking wildlife sir, personally I intend to stay on board as much as possible while we're grounded, so does Ian."

"But we are short handed as it is, I need you both to assist us with the equipment and survey work." Hyde's reply was terse with restrained anger.

Daniel's answer wasn't what the Professor was looking for. "At least one person should remain on board to monitor this vessel's systems and the com. links. I will pilot the shuttle whenever and wherever you want sir, but I don't care much for the idea of being something's dinner."

"I think that you are being overly cautious," the Professor began, "I see no need for you to be so afraid of a few..."

Daniel interrupted, "Afraid, sir?"

"Yes!"

"Would you care to retract that last statement, sir?" Daniel's steady gaze and quite tone told the man and all those present that perhaps a bad choice of words had been made. After a moment the Professor remembered that the boy was a knighted and highly decorated combat veteran, there had been accounts in the news media about what had occurred on Bones. There were the scars.

"I do retract what I said, it was uncalled for. It's just that we've all worked for so long to get to this point, I very much want this expedition to be a success."

"I want you to be successful too, sir. But please try to remember how far we are from any assistance and what may be in those jungles down there."

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"Equalizing hull pressure, powering down to ground settings." Ian relayed to his friend on the bridge what Daniel could already see, still there were procedures to be followed. Naval training tended to stay with you.

The outside temperature and humidity were both high, oxygen content in the atmosphere was above Earth normal. The RV Cooke sat in the middle of a huge square paved with closely set gray stones. Here and there small plants clung to life in the fine joints between the paving stones. In the distance was an enormous cone shaped structure surrounded by towering circular pillars of some sort of grey metallic composition. In all directions the ruins ended in a deep green jungle punctuated with trees that towered to over eight-hundred feet in height. The only animal life apparent was flight of bat-like creatures soaring slowly across the open area.

Daniel zoomed the viewcam in on the flying animals, the readout said that they had eight-foot wingspans, overlapping teeth were visible.

"Holy shit!"

Signing back on for a return voyage on the Rose of Seville didn't seem like such a bad option at this moment.

Cookes' shuttle was powered up for the first survey flight of the ruins, Daniel had a powerful beam pistol strapped to his right thigh. An even more powerful rail rifle was on the deck beside his command seat. He wasn't taking anything for granted, shuttles have been known to suffer power losses. They might have to walk back.

Ian was staying behind to monitor the Cooke and the progress of the shuttle, Rebecca was staying also but no "doing stuff" would occur. Ian did have a fine sense of duty and it didn't allow being distracted by even a beautiful girl.

The main hanger hatch swung down as Daniel gently lifted the small shuttle off of the deck. Following Daniel's orders Ian immediately raised the hatch once more after the shuttle had cleared the hanger. Professor Hyde was in the right seat next to Daniel, the craft had conventional windows and the best view was up front.

"Take us in close to the central cone structure if you can."

"Yes sir, will do." Daniel kept his flying smooth and level to pamper his civilian passengers.

The shuttle was about to cross between two of the towering pillars when Daniel made a violent braking maneuver, something barely seen had caught his eye.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" Hyde's voice was almost a scream. Loose equipment had flown around inside the shuttle, so had loose people.

"Just there, between the pillars, sir. I thought I saw a faint ripple or something."

"I don't see a thing!" Hyde's impatient tone didn't faze Daniel.

"I'm going to set down right here, I think some sort of field is being generated across those pillars. If I'm wrong you all will have my apologies."

After turning the craft 360 degrees to check for unwanted visitors Daniel grounded the shuttle very close to where he believed the field began. Everyone got out to see if the boy was hallucinating or something, he wasn't.

"Wait here. Mister Simmons, may I borrow that small rock hammer you have?"

Simmons handed the tool over to the boy who then walked a few paces toward the pillars. A strong overhand throw sent the hammer spinning through the air, halfway through it's arc it vaporized with a blinding flash of light and a resounding boom.

Like the shuttle would have done.

The ruins still possessed some sort of active power. N35467 was a very dangerous place.

"Good God!" Hyde was finally impressed by something. "You saved our lives dear boy!"

"Just part of the service sir, shall we continue our tour elsewhere?" Daniel sounded calmer than he really was, they had very nearly been disintegrated.

"Indeed, elsewhere." No one else seemed very interested in the pillars and the inner cone structure at the moment.

Elsewhere was decided upon, a large cube-shaped structure that seemed to have many low, oddly shaped entrance ways. Daniel did a low and very slow circuit of the structure before landing once more. The seven excited researchers piled out of the small shuttle, Daniel was the last to exit carrying the heavy rail rifle. Daniel had elected to stand watch by the shuttle and to keep his eyes open for anything with teeth and a shopping list. He was facing away from the structure when the first screams reached him.

Something gray and the size of an adult lion was charging out of one of the low entrance ways, Daniel barely managed to turn and get off one quick shot before the beaded skin monstrosity reached Naoki. Had he hit it?

He did, the heavy beast collapsed and rolled over the female researcher breaking her left arm in the process. The animal screamed and seemed to be snapping at the pain it felt in it's side, its prey forgotten for the moment. Daniel fired once more and scored a head shot, the beast dropped and lay still. Finally the frozen group of researchers were moving again, this time back to the shuttle, two of them helping the injured woman.

"Get your asses moving!" Daniel had spotted three more of the animals charging across the plaza from

another smaller structure. Taking his time (but not much) Daniel squeezed off round after round as the group ran for the shuttle, the rail rifle making it's distinctive crackling report. Two of the beasts were down when the last person tumbled into the shuttle, Daniel's last shot wounded the remaining animal enough to stop it's charge and give him time to bolt inside and shut the hatch. Takeoff was very fast and none too smooth, no one objected. Not a single one of the research expedition had managed to draw and fire their sidearms, Daniel wondered if they even knew how.

"Ian, we're heading back! We have one person injured by some sort of nasty thing with teeth! Don't open the hatch until I say so, this place is crawling with things that we don't want inside the ship!"

"No problem. How bad is the injury?" Ian asked, all business and seemingly quite calm.

"At least a broken arm. Scan around for anything moving near the ship, we don't want one of those things running around inside with us. Have Rebecca get one of the rail rifles from the locker and bring it up to you, just to be safe."

"Will do." Ian didn't have to be persuaded at all.

Daniel orbited around Cooke looking for anything bigger than mice with bad attitudes.

"It looks clear Ian, open up and then close the hatch as soon as we are inside."

"Opening up, don't take your time."

Daniel didn't, the shuttle was just touching the deck as Ian closed the hatch behind them.

This expedition was going to need some serious rethinking.

Naoki Nakashima was very lucky, broken ulna and radius bones and assorted bruises and lacerations could be survived quite nicely. It still hurt like hell so 'nurse' LaSalle administered some pain killer and a sleep inducer, tomorrow would be more bearable for the woman. The ensuing discussion with the Professor and the rest would not be so bearable.

"Sir, I think that you all should give some serious thought to calling off this whole thing," Daniel began.

"Impossible! We've just gotten off to a bad start today. We should look at other sites perhaps less dangerous."

"One person was nearly killed, she would have been killed if I hadn't gotten off a very lucky shot!"

"We shall be more alert for any animals next time, there is a wealth of knowledge on this planet!" Hyde didn't seem worth arguing with so Daniel turned to the others.

"You all had pistols, why was I the only one firing at those things?"

No one quite seemed to be looking in Daniel's direction after his last question. He asked another question.

"Do you all even know how to fire a pistol, or a rifle?"

Silence. Then John Hampton finally spoke up.

"There never seemed to be enough time to take the instruction course the university offered, we didn't really think we'd need them anyway."

"Then I think this vessel should get the hell off of this planet. If you want to come back you will need a very large security team and a lot more firepower than we have." Daniel laid it all out for them, could they be made to see the simple logic?

Of course not.

That evening Ian and Daniel talked over the day's nearly catastrophic events.

"As long as we're grounded the Professor is technically in charge of this vessel, if I take it off planet without his permission they would have grounds to press charges of theft and piracy against us." Daniel's explanation caused Ian's eyebrows to raise some, he had forgotten that particular point of maritime law.

"Can we send a message to the navy, tell them the situation and get their permission to leave?" Ian asked.

"It would take forever and the way the navy would see it we don't have a very convincing case," Daniel replied. "Could you jury rig a shield generator to protect them?"

Ian nodded his head no, "I probably could, it would take several days. I would have to cannibalize some of the main drive's superconducting windings and that would leave us stuck here."

Even Daniel knew that once cut the superconducting wire could not be fused back together again, it had to be manufactured in one continuous piece.

Ian continued, "Plus I would be in violation of the defense secrets decree concerning shield technologies, it has to stay strictly in the hands of the military."

"So what do we do?" Daniel's question went unanswered, neither boy could see an easy way out of their predicament.

People were going to get killed if they stayed here.

True to form Rebecca's interests were wandering again, Ian was nice in his own way but she had grown more and more fascinated with Daniel. He was after all a true hero, both in her eyes and in reality.

Today's events drew her even more to Daniel, he had acted once more as a hero should. After she had seen Ian leave his friend's cabin that evening she decided to act upon her 'interests'.

The watches were assigned for the evening, the light amplifying outside view cameras would have an attentive audience tonight. Daniel was tired so a hot shower and bed seemed the next order of business. After toweling off in the cabin's small head the slightly damp boy made a bee line for his bunk.

Rebecca was sitting on his bunk. Daniel stopped frozen in place clad only in his abused hide. A look of surprise and then some revulsion came over Rebecca's face. Few people have ever seen all of another person who had underwent what Daniel suffered.

"I... I'm sorry!" Rebecca jumped up and then fled the room before Daniel could react or say anything.

After a moment he sat on the edge of the bunk, ashamed and embarrassed of what he must look like.

"Maybe I should take the surgeon's advice and get rid of these." Daniel sat for a little while longer looking at his scars, maybe it was time to stop feeling so sorry for himself.

He never told Ian about Rebecca's short visit, although by now Ian had a much more realistic attitude about the girl.

Three hours before dawn Michael Richter triggered the general alarm klaxon, the area around the Cooke was alive with the same creatures that had attacked them earlier. The powerful reptilian animals seemed to want in.

Daniel was in his jump suit and headed toward the bridge before he was even fully awake, the rest of the vessel's personnel were a close second.

"What is it?" Daniel finished closing up his jump suit, his boots were in his cabin.

"Look!" Richter pointed at the main view screen.

There must have been over a hundred of the lion shaped 'things' milling around the ship, some jumped against the hull and tried to climb the sides of the vessel.

Daniel took one look at the scene out of hell on the view screen, he then turned to Professor Hyde.

"Sir, do you still want to continue your explorations now?"

Hyde was pale, he knew his hopes for this expedition were over.

"No. Take us away from this place. The vessel is yours to command."

"Thank you sir. Ian!"

"Right here." Indeed Ian didn't need to be shouted for.

"Sorry. Power up, prepare for an immediate departure."

"Yes sir, two minutes!" Ian had called Daniel 'sir' and he meant it.

When Cooke lifted off two of the lion creatures had actually made it onto the upper hull of the vessel, they didn't concede their territory until the vacuum of space killed them.

"Ian, when you have things in order would you please come to the bridge and enter a course for New Albion?" Daniel felt a weight off of his shoulders, N35467 was below the orbiting vessel.

"Yes sir, I already have it computed. Give me five minutes." Ian still kept calling Daniel 'sir'.

Professor Hyde was defeated in spirit and actuality. He had invested all of his professional standing in the scientific community and all of his personal assets to finance this expedition. He had little to show for his efforts save for a few hours of vid footage of the ruins on N35467. Daniel wasn't oblivious to the man's plight.

"Sir, I think the Empire will be very interested in just what was powering those ruins, especially what that field was that almost vaporized us. I don't hold the title of 'Prince' any longer, but a knight's word can still open a lot of doors."

"You would do that, after the things I said to you?" Hyde regarded the boy who sat beside him in the common area with some new appreciation.

"You're a good person, sir. You know more about alien cultures than, well...a lot of people. I can still get some people who count to listen to me, I'll need you to prepare a convincing report about what we've all seen here."

Hyde nodded slowly, all was not lost.

"I will do just that, when we reach New Albion you will have a complete and honest summary of what we have seen." Hyde seemed to gather himself, a sense of purpose once more in his mind.

"I'll have it forwarded to Fleet Headquarters, and the Hawkings institute, sir. With a note of my own recommending that you be part of any Imperial study of the planet." Daniel paused for a moment, one more awkward item to clear up.

"There's just one more thing I need to talk to you about, I hope you will understand."

"Yes?"

"It's Rebecca, sir."

"I beg your pardon?" The professor regarded Daniel with some confusion.

Daniel explained things as delicately as he knew how to.

"Good God!" Hyde was finally made to see what everyone else on the vessel knew. His first impulse was to find Ian and strangle him, as Daniel had predicted.

"Sir, she came to my cabin also. I am...well, I'm not very nice to look at without anything on. She left quickly sir, nothing happened between us."

"But, she was with..."

"Sir, don't blame Ian. He didn't start things, he's a good person and human just like you and me.

Rebecca's a very pretty, a very beautiful girl."

"I will have words with my granddaughter!"

"Thank you sir." Chapter Ten

## Home Again

RV Cooke grounded on New Albion after almost three weeks of non-space travel from N35467. Bakerstown looked much the same as the last time the boys had been there. In actual time not so long, in life's yardstick it had been forever for Daniel. A new crew for the Cooke had been signed aboard. Ian had said a quiet goodbye to his first love, Ian had cooled considerably toward the girl. She had made mention to Ian that Daniel was hard to look at, ugly even. Ian had almost slapped her, no more 'doing stuff' occurred after that.

"Now what?" Daniel asked, Ian as always had the logical solution.

"Rent a flyer and go home."

"Is it that simple?"

"Probably not, but I want to be with my family, with our family." Ian's answer was all that Daniel needed.

"Me too. Let's go."

## The Summer Palace, Earth

"They have arrived at New Albion, Your Majesty. The RV Cooke has signed on a new crew for passage to New Pretoria. Our people there say that there was possibly some trouble while at N35467, details will be forthcoming. Both His Highness and Sir Ian seemed from distant observations to be well and in good health."

"Thank you. Keep Us informed of any developments, pass along Our appreciation to your people." The Emperor smiled for the first time in many weeks.

New Albion, near Freehold

"It looks like the fall harvest season is over, the fields are all stubble." Ian's practiced eye and the date reinforced what Daniel had already decided. The small flyer passed over the now bleak landscape, farm houses and small towns passed beneath them.

"Are we in time for the Founders Day Dance?" Daniel really knew better.

"No, winter's about to happen. The fields are left alone for the next three months, mostly everyone does repairs and such," Ian explained. "I hope father won't be too mad at me."

"You have mostly saved the Empire from the Snake's with your shield. How could he be mad at you?" Daniel asked.

"I promised him I would be the best naval officer that I knew how to be, but I never would have been a very good officer," Ian answered.

"Bullshit! Do you remember Midshipman Starling?"

"God, how could I not remember?" Ian grinned at the mention of their mutual nemesis.

"He's probably commissioned by now."

"Do you really think so?"

"Count on it." Daniel could only shake his head at the very idea, Ian doubled up in laughter.

"There it is!" Ian had spotted his birth home before Daniel, perhaps it was something felt rather than seen.

Daniel landed the cheap rental flyer under the Big Tree. The white farmhouse was as he had remembered it, there were new structures beyond the old barn, new machinery was parked near the newer and bigger barn. Both boys tossed out their bags and closed up the flyer. Daniel inserted the rental card into its slot on the flyer, the small machine then lifted off to return automatically to its parking slot in Bakerstown.

"You go on ahead, I'll wait here." Daniel urged his friend on.

"This is our home, not just mine. We'll face father together, there's safety in numbers. We've been through worse." Ian dragged Daniel toward the house, a warm and loving home was just two-hundred yards away.

They were home.

No one else was, they were all in church. The boy's had overlooked the fact that it was a Sunday morning.

Ian and Daniel did a walking tour of the farm's additions, like the farmhouse the quarters for the hired hands were also empty.

"They're probably just here for the growing season, either that or they went to church too," Ian said.

Daniel was fascinated by the enormous and shiny new reapers.

"It's huge!" It was a ten foot climb just to get up to the control cab.

"Bigger is more efficient," Ian explained.

They were making their slow way back to the farmhouse when they spotted the family's new flyer approaching from the east.

"They're back, let's hope father's taken today's sermon to heart."

"I think you worry too much," Daniel replied, "I don't think he'll be all that upset. You are home and alive,

both of us are."

"True."

"Who's that by the barn?" Little Mary's keen eyes had spotted the two boys first.

Freddie Murphy was piloting the family flyer, he detoured for a low pass over the two small figures, they waved up at the craft as it flew over them.

"It's Ian and Daniel!" Ellen shouted in excitement.

"My God! It is them!" John Murphy added.

Ian's mother could only manage some tears of joy as she held onto her husband.

Freddie put the flyer down close to Ian and Daniel, Ellen could see even from this distance that something was wrong with Daniel's face.

"Oh no!" Ellen whispered as she left the flyer, she was the first out.

Everyone tried to hug each other at once, no one had dry eyes. Ellen finally had Daniel to herself for a moment, she put her hand gently on his scarred face before speaking softly.

"What did they do to you?"

"I sort of had a bad time with my first owner on Bones. If you don't want me to be.."

Daniel's explanation was interrupted when Ellen kissed him squarely on his lips and hugged him close.

Daniel took note that it was an even more pleasurable sensation than the last time she had hugged him.

Ellen had started replacing her angles with curves and soft places.

After more hugs and nose blowing the group of happy people wound up in the house's living room, there were many questions from everyone.

"Where have you two been all of this time? We tried to keep in touch!" This from Elizabeth Murphy.

"We've been working our way here, first on a passenger liner then on a research vessel." Daniel explained.

Ian bit the bullet. "We've both resigned our naval commissions, we had to work for our passages to get here."

It was like all of the sound in the room had been suddenly switched off. John Murphy stood and ran his hand through his hair, trying to keep his temper under control.

"But why? You both had so much before you, so..."

"Daniel interrupted quietly, "Sir we have both served honorably, I for one just don't have any more left to give to the Empire. That's why I abdicated my title and resigned my commission. Ian has his own reasons, good reasons."

John Murphy looked to this son and Ian continued, "I would probably have spent the rest of my life doing research, which is fine with me. But you don't have to be a naval officer to do that and I wasn't very good at being an officer."

Daniel and Ian both stood to face the man as Ian continued.

"Father, if you don't want us to be here..."

The man regarded his two 'sons' for a moment and then moved to embrace them both.

"Don't you ever say that again son, or I'll blister your skinny backside. That goes for the both of you."

Now they were truly home.

Many more questions were answered during their first day home, that evening Freddie asked Daniel what it had been like on the planet called Bones, something that not even Ian had pried too deeply into.

"Maybe Daniel doesn't feel like talking about that," Ellen said.

"That's okay, I guess it's time to tell someone." Daniel looked pointedly at Mary and then the little girl's mother. The hint was taken, this was something not for small ears to hear, off to bed.

"We all heard the accounts of how you and the midshipmen were taken, what happened then?" This from Ian's mother.

Daniel told them everything, perhaps much more than they really were prepared to hear. Talking about it seemed to take off some of the held back pressure in the boy. He talked of being property to be bought and sold. The punishment collars, the lashing at the brothel that nearly killed him. Living and toiling without the dignity of even clothing.

Samantha.

Daniel was surprised to find tears on his cheeks as he told them about Samantha, he had finally remembered how to cry again.

Later as Ian and Daniel were getting ready for bed there was one more small hurdle for Daniel to get past. Ian's parents came quietly to the boy's bedroom, they wanted to see what had been done their adopted son.

"Daniel, son we need to... We need to see what they did to you," John Murphy began, "we don't want to make you feel bad, if you would rather not show us."

"Father, Daniel doesn't like to..."

Daniel interrupted Ian, "It's all right, I guess I'm sort of family now. I've been thinking that maybe I should go to the surgeons and have myself made more presentable to look at. They offered to do that when we were first rescued. Maybe I wasn't thinking too straight when I said no to them."

As Daniel was calmly explaining things he turned his back to the two adults and pulled the large borrowed nightshirt up and over his head. The first sight of his bare body as he was facing away from them caused Elizabeth Murphy to gasp in shock, something she was immediately ashamed of. He turned to stand simply before them, the frontal view was just as bad.

Daniel wasn't really embarrassed to have Ian's folks see all of him in this setting, life as a slave had pretty well done away with any feelings of modesty he might once have had. It did bother him when he noticed Ellen standing back in the doorway, her hands over her mouth, tears in her eyes.

It bothered him a whole lot.

Daniel quickly turned away and hurriedly pulled the nightshirt back on. Ellen's parents turned to see what had upset Daniel.

"Ellen!" Elizabeth Murphy was also very upset at her daughter's intrusion.

"I'm sorry! I was just going to tell Ian and Daniel goodnight! I didn't mean to, I mean..." The girl's tears told everyone that she hadn't meant anything else than just that.

"It's all right, don't be mad at Ellen," Daniel said, once more clad in the oversized white nightshirt.

Daniel crossed the room and gave the crying girl a kiss on her forehead, he received a hug and kiss in return before Ellen fled to her own room.

"Maybe I should go see the surgeons pretty soon. I'm sort of tired of being a one man freak show."

Both of Ian's parents embraced Daniel before they left him and Ian for the night, John Murphy had the last word.

"You're no freak, it's what's inside your skin that counts. Just the same we'll go into Bakerstown first thing tomorrow, they have a pretty decent medical facility there. We'll see what they have to say."

Ian's last words as they lay in their separate beds in the dark settled the matter further.

"Maybe they can fix your nose too."

"What's wrong with my nose?" Daniel asked, taking the bait.

"It's always sniffing out trouble for the both of us. Have it removed or something."

"I'll sleep on it." Daniel replied.

"Your nose?"

"Shut up."

"Good night."

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The Sisters of Mercy operated many hospitals in the outer colonies. True to their name they did not practice medicine for a profit, they ran on a break even basis. If you could afford it you paid what they asked, if not you were still given the best care they could offer. Few people took advantage of the system. Daniel's appearance in the evaluation clinic caused some considerable excitement among the staff. Doctor Cahn was on tap to do the initial examination and evaluation. He had never seen a person who had been lashed with a whip from head to toe, or anywhere else for that matter.

"Dear God son, who did this to you?"

"Madame Simone, she ran a rather odd brothel on Bones."

Cahn like everyone else had heard some of the story of what Daniel had been through, but not all of it.

"Why this?"

"I was... I was intended to be a pretty boy for some of her pervert customers. I killed my first customer before he really got started with me. Madame Simone had a bad temper."

"Had?"

"She faced a marine firing squad. So what do you think about my upholstery, can you patch it?"

"In a word, yes. We can do it a section at a time but I think your best option is about four days in a regen tank. I believe you have been through regeneration before?"

"Yes sir. It sort of messed up my mind for a while."

"It does that to everyone," Doctor Cahn explained, "but then you must know that. I would recommend the tank, it's your choice."

"Let's go for the tank then. My mind is already messed up, a little more won't matter."

#### The Summer Palace

"His Highness was admitted to the hospital at Bakerstown, Your Majesty. Our contact there says that he is to undergo regenerative procedures to eliminate his severe scarring. Sir Ian's parents are the persons on record as being responsible for the expenses. Treatment time is estimated to be four days."

The Emperor was more than pleased with this report.

"Excellent! Tell your people that their efforts are appreciated. See to it that the cost of his treatment is billed to the Empire. Discreetly!"

"Of course, Your Majesty."

The Senior Imperial Agent indulged herself in a smile that equaled her Emperor's.

#### New Albion, Bakerstown

When Daniel came out of regeneration, he was back at Madame Simone's establishment. Ian was there to hold onto him and to talk him back into reality. Daniel had woke up screaming and trying to get away from an invisible whip that was tormenting him. It was quite the worst reaction that any of the medical staff had ever observed. Sedatives and his best friends gentle words finally brought Daniel out of his small hell.

The scars were gone save for a faint line across his face. The memories of what had caused his scars could never be erased.

Nor should they be.

No amount of questioning by John Murphy could get the hospital to tell him why there was no charge for Daniel's time there.

"We have sufficient funds for this, we should pay!"

"I'm sorry sir, all I know is that full payment has been made already by uncoded funds. I honestly do not know who paid the bill." The clerk was as much in the dark as Murphy was.

It didn't take much deduction to see the Emperor's hand in this. John Murphy would speak about it with

Daniel when the boy was up to speed again.

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Christmastime was only two weeks away, a holiday celebrated at each planet's particular winter solstice. On Earth it was presently late summer, on new Albion it was winter holiday time. Daniel and Ian's present shopping list's each had only one check mark indicating a successful purchase. Little Mary was easy to shop for, she loved dolls of any shape and size. Both boys still had a good amount of money left over from their time as pilots and navigator/engineers (and waiters) to buy everyone nice gifts.

"What can I get Ellen?" This was Daniel's biggest worry.

"A wedding ring?" Ian was no help.

"Get real! I need some help here!"

"You could go out and pick up the first dirt clod you spot and then give it to her. She would cherish it forever." Ian knew how his twin sister felt about Daniel.

"She really likes me then?"

"Like doesn't begin to cover it, she loves you madly."

This was the first time that Ian had ever actually said what everyone in the family already knew.

"Do you... I mean do you think she really...."

"She's loved you since the first day she ever saw you. Don't you ever do anything to ruin that!"

Ian's strong words thrust into Daniel's soul like keen blade.

"No, I won't ever do that. I just don't know how to go about saying that I love her too."

Daniel had never said that either, he did indeed love Ellen. It wasn't some newly activated hormone inspired fantasy, he loved the gentle girl. She was pretty but not an achingly beautiful siren like Rebecca, Daniel was handsome (again) but no Adonis. They were made for one another, age has nothing to do with such things.

In the end Daniel decided on an engraved gold heart on a gold chain. The printing was rather small but young eyes could read simply "Dearest Ellen, I love you and I will always love you, Daniel."

Other presents purchased by Daniel:

For John Murphy, a gentleman's pistol with his initials engraved on the frame.

For Elizabeth Murphy, a fine scarf of actual silk, hand dyed and sewn.

For Freddie he managed a deal on a small two-seat flyer (very used). It needed some work on the drive controls but Ian could fix that in his sleep.

Mary got a doll that could hold a conversation with you and seemed just a bit uppity at times.

For Ian. What to get Ian? He found it in Bakerstown's one and only antique (junk) shop. It was beyond being an antique, it should have been in a museum. Three thousand years plus had not been kind to it but you could still make out some of the numbers on the ancient wooden slide rule. How it came to be in this place and time was a mystery. Daniel had it mounted on a small plaque that read "For Sir Ian Murphy, the best engineer in the Empire and the worst damned pilot in the navy." It was one of the few outstanding objects that the shop had. Daniel spent all of his remaining money for it and signed an agreement to pay off the balance in twice a year payments. He was not a naive buyer, he had the slide rule analyzed at Bakerstown's small college, they had a rather good ancient history department. He'd better land that cargo job at the port they had talked about!

A light dusting of snow was on the fields when the Murphy clan sat down on the holiday's eve to open presents. Heavy snows were unknown at this latitude on the planet, when it did snow it was usually melted and gone in a day or two. Naturally Mary was the first to tear into her presents, she also had the most to open. Daniel's talking present was well received to say the least. A big wet kiss from the little girl was the best sort of thank you.

Daniel sat down next to Freddie and handed him a small wrapped box. After Ian's older brother had opened the box he gave Daniel a questioning look.

"These are flyer keys." Freddie observed.

"It's out in the big barn, it not new and needs some work but Ian said we could have it in good order pretty quick," Daniel explained.

Freddie picked up Daniel completely off the floor and gave him another big wet kiss on his forehead.

This properly embarrassed Daniel as was intended and had the whole place roaring with laughter.

Present opening was delayed for an hour as everyone followed Freddie's vapor trail out to the big barn. Freddie was very happy.

Everyone was happy that evening but none more so than Ellen and Daniel. The girl's present to Daniel was similar to the one he gave her, a heavy silver bracelet engraved with almost identical words. Ellen's life savings and a bit of help from her father went into buying the gift. Things were a little awkward for a moment when Daniel and Ellen shared their first 'real' kiss and embrace right in front of the whole family, they were oblivious to their surroundings. Some throat clearing from Ellen's father and Ian's rude remark finally separated them.

"Somebody throw some water on them!"

From Ian, Daniel received a new pilot's flight suit of the sort favored by civilian crewmen. Daniel's naval Fleet Ace pilot wings were pinned properly to the suit's breast, the skull and crossbones looked as sinister as ever. "I did some research," Ian explained, "you're entitled to wear those wings after being discharged."

Daniel continued the evening's silly tradition and gave Ian a sloppy kiss.

Ian regarded the plaque with the ancient slide rule that Daniel gave him as if he were holding the Imperial Scepter.

"This is...where did you ever find this?" Ian was pretty much at a loss for words.

"Right here on New Albion. It's sort of well used. If you try to kiss me I'll break your nose."

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## The Summer Palace

It was nearing the end of the summer season, in a few days the royal household would make the move to the Sun Palace. His Majesty had decided on one last hike in the mountains before leaving his favorite residence. The long walks with just a few trailing aides and security people helped the man to think more clearly, to decide matters long considered.

A second Prince of the Empire and even a third was on his mind this day. Advisors had been pressing the Emperor to name other possible heirs. One young and troubled boy was poor insurance that the line of succession would be unbroken if something happened to the present Emperor. Prince Daniel didn't even know that he was indeed still a Prince, he might even refuse the call to assume the mantle of all power in the Empire. Daniel was considered far too young, years of training had been planned for him.

Long dormant geological forces stirred slightly beneath the Emperor's boots. It was just a small tremor, not enough to rattle even a single dish in one's cupboard. It was however enough to add the final bit of strain needed to break loose the four-thousand standard tons of granite that obliterated the absolute ruler of mankind. His final brief thoughts before the darkness were of pity for Daniel.

## Chapter Eleven

## Majesty

The spring planting was just getting underway, the plowing and seeding operations were going well. The new machinery for filling the shipping pods had arrived and was in the process of being installed. John Murphy was proving to be an able manager and businessman as well as a farmer, he was expanding operations in prudent steps. Ian seemed to be happy to be working with his hands instead of his mind for a change, although his evenings were often occupied with some sort of incomprehensible theory he had about focused shield projections. Daniel tried to grasp what his friend attempted to explain to him, to no avail.

John and Elizabeth Murphy kept a close but gentle eye on their daughter and Daniel. A parent's concerns about young and newly felt emotions were not without some justification. But Ellen and Daniel had been raised by responsible parents, their moments of intimacy were self limited to more practiced kisses and quick embraces out of the sight of the others.

Daniel had applied for and got a slot flying port based cargo shuttles out of Bakerstown. It was an on-call sort of arrangement, when a vessel was in orbit that needed extra cargo shuttles Daniel was called. The job was paying for the small and fast one-person flyer that Daniel had purchased for his commute, it would also pay off the debt he owed to the antique dealer. John Murphy had offered whatever money Daniel might have wanted, the boy's pride and Free Trader ethics turned down the offer.

The family was halfway through Wednesday's evening meal when the house began to vibrate ever so gently.

"Is it an earthquake?" Elizabeth Murphy asked with some alarm.

Ian and Daniel looked at each other, they both knew what caused such effects. A very large space vessel was grounding somewhere close by.

The family went to the front porch of the isolated farmhouse, a main battle dreadnought, HMS Nelson, was sitting squarely in the middle of the newly planted west quarter. Surely the Imperial Navy wasn't just dropping by for biscuits and gravy.

"Oh shit!" Daniel had the most awful feeling about this.

The seven people watched as the giant vessel's main ramp was lowered, a great number of marines in dress uniforms formed ranks beside the warship. About a dozen naval officers made their careful way across the uneven plowed ground to the white farmhouse.

They stopped at the proper distance and bowed before the boy with the black hair and green eyes. The Admiral of The Fleet advanced and bowed once more before Daniel, in his outstretched hands was the Imperial Scepter, the symbol of all power in the Empire. His words told Daniel that his universe had changed forever.

"Your Highness, the Emperor has passed from this life. Do you accept this scepter and all that it commands?"

At this moment the news of the Emperor's death was being flashed to the Empire, an event that had occurred ten days ago. That Daniel Grayson was the only name on the letter of Imperial succession was a shock to most but not surprising to those who closely followed such matters. Daniel's letter of abdication had never been publicly acknowledged and honored, indeed it didn't even exist.

Daniel moved slowly toward the bowing officer, an officer he had met before. In his mind he had already perceived what was occurring, still he needed to ask.

"Please stand sir. What does this all mean?"

"His Imperial Majesty passed from this life ten days ago. It was an act of God, a rock fall. It took him as he walked near the Summer Palace. The letter of succession had only your name upon it."

Again the question was posed.

"Do you accept this Scepter?"

Daniel almost didn't reach out and take the ancient bronze scepter, but in the end he did. A part of the boy stood apart and wondered why he was now accepting all that he had tried to forfeit. The scepter was heavier than it appeared, the sculpted eagle and sword represented on it were worn smooth by many hands. He turned to look at his family, they were bowing to him, even little Mary.

"By the grace of God and the Laws of Succession you are named Emperor and Absolute Ruler of The New Empire, Protector of all Humanity. May God bless Your Majesty."

Daniel fought to collect his thoughts before he spoke.

"I need some time, this is my family," Daniel motioned to his adoptive kin, "I need to be alone with them for a while. Please stand down your marines. I... We will meet with you in a short while."

"Of course Your Majesty, the fleet is at your disposal."

A part of Daniel marveled at how easy it was to say the word "We" and at how such a short time ago he had denounced all that saying it had implied. Perhaps he accepted the scepter because he knew that the Empire needed continuity. The symbol of all power in the Empire had passed without interruption from Emperor to Prince for almost three thousand years.

But what of the family that he had grown to love, that loved him?

Ellen?

By some unspoken agreement Daniel and his family sat down around the large dining table that was just off the kitchen area. The foot long baton of power lay on the table in front of Daniel, for a while no one said anything. What could they say? The small vid unit was still on in the kitchen, it was carrying the news that everyone at the table already knew.

Finally little Mary broke the silence, she was sitting next to Daniel, by now her favorite big brother.

"What's that?" Mary pointed at the dark metal scepter.

"It's power, Mary. All of the power that there is." Daniel placed the scepter in front of the small girl, she shrank back a little and refused to touch the sinister looking thing.

"She's smarter than I am." Daniel's small attempt at easing the mood fell a bit flat.

"What's going to happen to you, to us?" Ellen looked devastated, in her young mind she had harbored visions of a life together with Daniel.

"I have to return to Earth at once," Daniel explained, "people have to see that the Empire is functioning, that life goes on."

"Can't I please..can't we stay together?" Ellen knew the answer to the question by the look in Daniel's eyes, she left the room in tears and fled to her room. Daniel rose to go after her, John Murphy caught him firmly by his arm.

"Leave her be for right now, let her have a good cry."

Daniel felt like crying too but held it together as he sat back down.

"Do you all want to...there will be the state funeral, a coronation?"

"Ian's investiture was almost more than we could handle son, will you think badly of us if we don't come?" John Murphy dreaded the idea of enduring such a massive ceremony as the coronation of a new Emperor.

"No. I was hoping you would say that. This is your world here, not some gilded palace with bowing servants and a million people watching you."

Daniel looked at Ian with a question in his eyes.

"I'll pack a bag." Ian answered the unspoken request with a small grin, his brother needed him at his side.

"It won't be forever, just till I get sick of looking at you." Daniel found he too could still smile some

despite the circumstances.

They had a hundred small things to talk over, details of a life suddenly shifted from a simple and quiet existence to the center of power in the Empire. Ian could have Daniel's flyer when he returned home. The debt at the antique dealer had to be paid off, so did the flyer.

"I'll send what you have to spend." Daniel was now literally the richest person in the Empire. He would never again have to even think of money or the cost of used flyers. But for now he paid his debts.

It was time to go up to Ellen's room.

"What can I say to her?"

Elizabeth Murphy answered softly. "Tell her what you are thinking, tell her what your heart tells you." The stairs up to the girl's room seemed much steeper for some reason. Her room was dark save for some pale moonlight coming in the window (yes New Albion had a moon, three in fact).

"Ellen?" Daniel sat at the foot of her bed, the girl lay face down on her crossed arms.

"What?" She seemed more mad than sad.

"You know that I have to do this, I have no choice really."

"I'm so tired of always having to say goodbye to you," Ellen began. "We have some time together and we're happy for a little while and then you're gone again. And now this! I'll probably never see you again, I'm just some stupid farm girl and always will be! I'll probably wind up marrying Billy Jenkins!"

"Who's Billy Jenkins?"

"Never mind!"

"Billy Jenkins, whoever that is, will have to wait till I'm dead and buried! Will you marry me?"

Ellen sat up and faced Daniel in the dim light.

"What did you say?"

"Will you marry me? When we're a little older of course."

"Hell yes!" Ellen never had said much more than 'darn' in Daniel's presence before now.

"Then stop blubbering, you'll have me doing it." In fact Daniel's cheeks were a bit damp also.

"How long will...when will I get to see you again?" Ellen asked quietly.

"I'm not too sure, but tell your father not to bother planting anything where that warship is grounded. The royal yacht will be using that spot quite a lot from now on."

It was finally time to go. When Daniel stepped out into the predawn chill five-hundred armed Imperial Marines snapped to attention. No one in the house had even heard them as they had formed up in front of the house. How long had they been there?

"Walk with me to the ship," Daniel said quietly to his family. And so they did. Daniel had packed a flight bag with the small things that mattered to him. Ian had done the same. Both boys were a bit unsure about what to wear, in the end they just wore the clothes of civilians who worked with their hands. Freddie insisted on carrying their bags, in truth there wasn't a lot in them. The Emperor could afford new clothing.

At the base of the ramp they made their goodbyes. A great many senior naval officers and marines managed to look elsewhere as Ellen kissed her future husband to be in a manner not quite in keeping with her age. A wave goodbye as the ramp was raised into the warship's hull, then Ian and mankind's Emperor were gone from New Albion.

"Your orders, Your Majesty?" The Admiral of The Fleet bowed as he spoke.

"Take Us to Earth, sir."

"With all dispatch, Your Majesty. Welcome aboard Nelson. Would you do the ship the honor of reviewing the crew?"

"Of course, lead the way sir."

It was by necessity only a small representative cross section of the now busy crew. Ian and Daniel did pause and speak for a few moments with one of the ensigns who was on parade. Later they discussed the small incident when they were preparing for some much needed sleep.

"How is it possible?" Daniel asked.

"It's not. The odds are not computable." Ian replied.

"Ensign Starling, good God!" Daniel shook his head in disgust.

"I wonder if this tub has a rat hole?" Ian as always seemed to have the right idea.

